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**'The Weight of a Rhetoric of Buildings'
Literary Uses of Architectural Space, 1909-1975**

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**‘The Weight of a Rhetoric of Buildings’:
Literary Uses of Architectural Space, 1909-
1975**

Simon Vickery

Thesis for the degree of PhD in English
King’s College London, 2015

Abstract

This thesis examines the often uneasy dialogue between literature and architecture in twentieth-century Britain through reading literary representations of architectural space, with a particular focus on London. In a period characterised by the development of new technologies and building practices, the continuing and rapid expansion of urban centres, and the traumas of global warfare, many and varied writers responded to these shifts and transformations through turning their attentions to architectural spaces, taking them as points at which competing tensions collide, and thus using them as a way to register moments of personal, social, political or cultural change.

The introduction sets out the parameters of my study and situates it in relation to recent criticism, while outlining the thesis's central concerns. My first chapter explores, through a number of different literary texts, three moments and their related preoccupations: the Edwardian era and the place of both the machine and the country house in its artistic imaginary; the years following the First World War and the experience of returning combatants; and the emergence of the first shoots of a British architectural modernism during the inter-war decades. I argue that each of these texts uses architectural space to create a dialogue with the past or an imagined future, or both. Chapter 2 focuses on the Blitz and argues that, in this chaotic and destructive moment, writers were pushed to find new ways to write about a newly, and dangerously, active architecture. I look at this concern with the forms and limits of representation amongst writers alongside what I identify as a turn towards documentation amongst architects. Chapter 3 is interested in attitudes towards post-war reconstruction at a time when it was still largely, or entirely, hypothetical. Beginning with plans drawn up while the war was still raging, and following the debate through until 1956, I contrast an enthusiasm for reconstruction amongst architects, commentators and the general public with the deep sense of unease that was being articulated in that moment by writers. The literary texts considered in Chapter 4 all engage with the narrative of reconstruction's 'failure' that began to emerge in the mid-1950s, offering sustained literary engagements with the realities of post-war architecture. But at the same time as engaging with this very public conversation they are all equally if not more preoccupied, I argue, with using architecture as a way to explore individual psychology.

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Introduction: ‘Ferro-concrete is fallible’

The British Empire Exhibition was held on the outskirts of London in 1924, and again the following year. *The Lion Roars at Wembley*, published to celebrate the sixtieth anniversary of the Exhibition, paints the following scene:

Entering the Exhibition at Wembley, the visitors had spread before them the wondrous reality of the British Empire, the might and magnitude – her grandeur and her glory. Riches and romance, ancient civilisation flowering in modern enterprise, the limitless range of activity and achievement. The scene was without parallel in the history of mankind.¹

Virginia Woolf, who visited the Exhibition during its first months, was rather less enthused by the spectacle on offer. Her short essay ‘Thunder at Wembley’ mocks the ‘mediocrity’ of the Exhibition with sarcastic wit. The price of ‘six and eightpence’ becomes a metonym: ‘Six and eightpence is not a large sum; but neither is it a small sum. It is a moderate sum, a mediocre sum. It is the prevailing sum at Wembley’.² The exhibition buildings too – ‘those vast, smooth, grey palaces’ – are similarly moderate and mediocre: ‘[N]o vulgar riot of ideas tumbled expensively in their architect’s head; equally, cheapness was abhorrent to him, and vulgarity anathema. Per perch, rod, or square foot, however ferro-concrete palaces are sold, they too work out at six and eightpence’ (p.169). The Exhibition, intended to inspire awe and wonder, and stir patriotic passions, is instead hopelessly underwhelming.

But then, just as one is beginning a little wearily to fumble with those two fine words – democracy, mediocrity – nature asserts herself where one would least look to find her – in clergymen, school children, girls, young men, invalids in bath-chairs. [...] But what has happened to our contemporaries? Each is beautiful; each is stately. Can it be that one is seeing human beings for the first time? In streets they hurry; in houses they talk; they are bankers in banks; sell shoes in shops. Here against the enormous background of ferro-concrete Britain, of rosy Burma, at large, unoccupied, they reveal themselves simply as human beings, creatures of leisure, civilisation, and dignity; a little languid perhaps, a little attenuated,

¹ Donald R. Knight and Alan D. Sabey, *The Lion Roars at Wembley: British Empire Exhibition 60th Anniversary, 1924-1925* (Hertfordshire: D.R. Knight, 1984), p.1.

² Virginia Woolf, ‘Thunder at Wembley’ in *Selected Essays*, ed. by David Bradshaw (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008) pp.169-171 (p.169). Subsequent references to this edition are given in parentheses within the main body of the text. Originally published in *Nation and Athenaeum*, 28 June 1924.

but a product to be proud of. Indeed they are the ruin of the Exhibition. [...] As you watch them trailing and flowing, dreaming and speculating, admiring this coffee-grinder, that milk and cream separator, the rest of the show becomes insignificant. And what, one asks, is the spell it lays upon them? How, with all this dignity of their own, can they bring themselves to believe in that? (p.170)

The visitors' presence reveals the Exhibition's true face: it is a sham; a pointless space, undone by the sheer humanity of those that have come to traipse around it. 'It is nature', so Woolf states at the start of the essay, 'that is the ruin of Wembley'. 'Nature' encompasses the grass and the chestnut trees that were 'eradicated' to make way for the Exhibition, and the thrushes that still occupy the site in spite of this clearance. (p.169). It encompasses the visitors, their 'leisure, civilisation, and dignity'. And it also encompasses the sky.

The sky is livid, lurid, sulphurine. It is in violent commotion. It is whirling water-spouts of cloud into the air; of dust in the Exhibition. Dust swirls down the avenues, hisses and hurries like erected cobras round the corners. Pagodas are dissolving in dust. Ferro-concrete is fallible. [...] The Empire is perishing; the bands are playing; the Exhibition is in ruins. For that is what comes of letting in the sky (p.171).

In this vision of the Exhibition's destruction erosion is accelerated to an impossible degree, the architecture blown and washed away. These buildings – the three 'Palaces' of 'Arts', 'Engineering' and 'Industry' – were constructed to project an image of the British Empire in rude health, and Woolf uses their imagined dissolution to suggest just how flimsy this image was in the Empire's twilight years.³

Twentieth-century Britain produced many literary texts that, like Woolf's essay, sought to engage critically with the built environment. In a period characterised by the development of new technologies and building practices, the continuing and rapid expansion of urban centres, and the traumas of global warfare, many and varied writers responded to these shifts and transformations through turning their attentions to architectural space. There are two key ways in which Woolf's essay speaks to this broad trend and to the particular concerns of this thesis. Firstly, it uses a series of architectural spaces to articulate something altogether less solid, less well-defined than the buildings themselves, and it does so by drawing

³ The Palaces were built using the most up-to-date, practical and economical material: ferro-concrete.

upon the meanings and associations which have accrued around that architecture. Secondly, it insists upon the importance of the individual, the momentary and the fragmentary.

This thesis examines the often uneasy dialogue between literature and architecture in twentieth-century Britain through reading literary representations of architectural space. In approaching these literary texts I pose the following questions: How and to what ends do these texts use architectural space? How is this use influenced and structured by the historical, social, political and architectural contexts in which the texts were written? How is this use influenced and shaped by the architectural spaces that are described? How are the texts more broadly – in terms of narrative, form and characterisation – shaped by and in response to the spaces with which they engage? What is the relationship between architectural space and psychological space as presented in these texts? According to these texts, what is at stake when an individual inhabits architecture? And what is at stake when that inhabitation is described? How and why do the answers to these questions change as we move from text to text and from year to year?

I focus my attention on the years between 1909 and 1975. The precise parameters of my study are in a sense somewhat arbitrary, being the publication dates of the first and last texts that I discuss. The movement from the Edwardian era to the dawn of neoliberalism, however, is more intentional. In the first decade of the twentieth century Britain had already undergone the incredible transformation that was Victorian industrialisation, and was poised on the cusp of modernism, waiting for the dreadful catalyst of the First World War. By the mid-1970s the project of post-war reconstruction was coming to an end, and with it a particular kind of British architectural modernism. This modernism, in common with its Continental cousins, was much exercised by the idea of transforming urban space *in its totality*. Thus the thesis as a whole covers a period in time during which the idea of a radically altered city had unusual currency. This sense of there being at least the possibility of some kind of drastic transformation – although it is sometimes more of a frustrated possibility – underpins all of the literary texts that I examine, and I will give this theme a more thorough introduction shortly.

London is my geographical focus. It has been the focus also of many of the conversations that have shaped architecture in Britain during the period in question. The city, for example, suffered the most sustained bombing campaign of all Britain's

cities during the Second World War, and much of the mythology and iconography around the Blitz – St Paul’s standing tall amidst the fire and smoke, resilient citizens packed into Tube tunnels – is derived from London’s experience. Much of the post-war reconstruction debate, too, was focussed on the capital: plans for rebuilding covered by the architectural press tended to be plans for London’s rebuilding. Indeed, London was very often the focus of any conversation about contemporary urban architecture conducted in the architectural press, which was, of course, itself based in London. I will, however, on occasion step outside of the capital, and outside of the city more generally. This is because at various points a particular version or idea of the rural was deliberately constructed in opposition to events and activities that were London, or more broadly urban, focussed.⁴ There will also be some instances in which the conversations I am tracing themselves moved beyond London to take in other sites of particular significance, be they urban or rural.

Literature vs. Architecture: ‘Mutually exclusive and antagonistic’

In 2011/12 the Office for Metropolitan Architecture – an architectural practice founded by Dutch architect Rem Koolhaas and frequently abbreviated to OMA – staged an exhibition entitled *OMA/Progress* at the Barbican Centre. One of the exhibition’s rooms consisted of a series of statements on architecture presented in the form of short texts, photographs, drawings, digitally made images, or a combination of all four, printed on pads of paper adhered to the walls. In one corner of the room these statements were concerned particularly with London’s peculiar, singular relationship with architecture. One of the sheets, entitled ‘Modernisation’, stated:

In many ways London constitutes a definitive rebuke of Architecture’s [sic] main mission. Where architecture acts to change things, London adapts to the change of things. Its genius resides in a regime of permanent improvisation. Maybe the city’s tradition of accommodating change without really having to change its physical substance is so long that its people will never truly believe the reasons architects quote for their interventions.

⁴ Raymond Williams notes: ‘Rural Britain was subsidiary, and knew that it was subsidiary, from the late nineteenth century. But so much of the past of the country, its feelings and its literature, was involved with rural experience, and so many of its ideas of how to live well, from the style of the country-house to the simplicity of the cottage, persisted and even were strengthened, that there is almost an inverse proportion, in the twentieth century, between the relative importance of the working rural economy and the cultural importance of rural ideas’. Raymond Williams, *The Country and the City* (Nottingham: Spokesman, 2011), p.248.

A second, labelled ‘Modernism’, read:

If there is a ‘Modern London’ it is not the result of conviction, but of slowly conceding ground. London engages modernity on its own terms: hosting modernity without ever really entering into the obligation to modernise as a city. Even with the city now being an almost permanent construction site, of new and ever more modern projects, one cannot help but feel that the modernisation of London itself will always be officially on hold.⁵

OMA’s statements imply an antagonistic relationship between London and architecture. That a city should be antagonistic to architecture – that it should even be *possible* for a city to be antagonistic to architecture – is counterintuitive. A city, in some sense, *is* its architecture; the sheer mass of buildings is one of the key ways in which a city is distinct from, say, the countryside. But in OMA’s statements architecture is an *other*, an external force that insists upon the need for change, for transformation, and that is endlessly resisted by ‘London’.

In this formulation, then, ‘London’ is not the physical fabric of the city’s streets and buildings, but the people that inhabit them. This, Lawrence Phillips suggests in his account of London’s post-war literature, is the proper way to understand the city. He warns:

There is a temptation [...] of reading London as a thing, an entity that somehow exists independently of the human lives that swarm and swirl within its borders. [...] The physical form of a city does not precede the process and performance of its existence; it is an artificial environment that owes its very existence to an accretion of disparate human experience. With the passage of time and the physical evidence of residual and emerging cultural practices, this connection can be easily obscured and the city can appear to have a discursive ‘life’ of its own, but there is no city, no community, without individual identity.⁶

These identities and experiences, which appear momentary and fragmentary when set against the continuum of bricks and mortar, constitute the real life of the city, and it is this relationship – that of a fleeting human life to a city dense with history, or of

⁵ ‘Modernisation’ and ‘Modernism’, A5 sheets by OMA/Progress, *OMA/Progress* exhibition, Barbican Centre, 6th October 2011 – 19th February 2012.

⁶ Lawrence Phillips, *London Narratives: Post-War Fiction and the City* (London and New York: Continuum, 2006), p.158.

a busy human body to the streets it navigates – that is described in the city's literature.

Also captured in this literature, I will argue in the course of this thesis, is the antagonism that OMA identifies: antagonism between 'London' and its physical fabric, between the individual and built space, between literature and architecture. Recent studies of twentieth-century London literature have tended to emphasise harmony instead of antagonism. In discussing the relationship between literature, architecture and the modern city Jonathan Charley writes:

[I]t is tempting to see the spatial imagination of the writer and the architect as mutually exclusive and antagonistic, as if one of the novelist's roles is to function as a corrective to the contradictions thrown up by modern urbanisation and to critique the dangerous fantasies of architects. [...] However, a more productive way of understanding the relationship between the imagination of the novelist and the architect-urbanist is to see them as indispensable to each other, such that when viewed together they enrich and deepen our understanding of the development of the twentieth-century city.⁷

Similarly, Phillips writes:

In many respects literary narratives – and other representation forms founded on narrative – codify experiential narratives formed from lived experience. [...] In relation to the city there is an ongoing negotiation between images, histories and memories, literary narrative, and lived experience that flows both ways.⁸

To read urban literature with a close eye on the architectural discourses and developments with which it was coincident is to gain a more nuanced perspective on the changing physical reality of the city, and on the way that reality was experienced. Matthew Taunton, introducing his study of fictional representations of urban housing, makes a similar case for the value of a methodology that looks at literature and architecture together:

⁷ Jonathan Charley, 'Time, Space and Narrative: Reflections on Architecture, Literature and Modernity', in *Writing the Modern City: Literature, Architecture, Modernity*, ed. by Sarah Edwards and Jonathan Charley (London and New York: Routledge, 2012), pp.1-18 (p.14).

⁸ Phillips, *London Narratives*, pp.4-5.

Fictions of the city [...] frequently contain projections about the ways in which that city could be improved or perfected, or go to wrack. In this regard novels and films about urban life form a continuum with treatises on urban planning, architectural manifestoes and social reform tracts.⁹

Taunton goes on to suggest that literature can serve to ‘dramatise’ a dialectic consisting of both the subjective experience of inhabiting a home and the more objective perspective of the architect and planner.¹⁰

This thesis takes a comparable premise as its starting point: namely that when approached in tandem and understood as different responses to shared conditions – to the same imaginative and experiential raw materials – the practices of literature and architecture serve to illuminate one another and the experience of inhabiting a city. But it also insists that the relationship between literature and architecture in twentieth-century Britain very often *was* an antagonistic one, and that it was antagonistic in two senses. The first is historically contingent and operates at the level of the individual text, which is simply to say that many of the texts I read in the course of this thesis took exception to contemporaneous architecture in some regard. It is largely this relationship, or more accurately series of different but sometimes interconnected relationships, that I detail in the thesis. The second sense relates to a more general point about the relationship between literature and architecture, and I want here to draw a key distinction between the two disciplines. In so doing I am, perhaps, stating the obvious, but as this distinction will go on to inform to some extent every connection that I make between literature and architecture in the course of this thesis I think it is worth drawing explicitly here. The practice of architecture is by its very nature a kind of intervention; its intention is to reorganise space in some fashion. Even pieces of architectural criticism, or manifestos, or utopian sketches, must have some kind of relationship to this impulse, being as they are interested, however indirectly, in transforming the physical reality of buildings and streets. If these texts – or plans, or models – do not relate to some sort of intention for built space, however provisional or hypothetical, then they start to become something else: a fiction. Fiction has no obligations towards the city; it need not intervene; its distance from reality is assumed. Indeed, we are very often wary of

⁹ Matthew Taunton, *Fictions of the City: Class, Culture and Mass Housing in London and Paris* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), p.1.

¹⁰ Taunton, *Fictions of the City*, p.6.

overstating any correspondence between works of fiction and ‘real life’. Writers of fiction are at liberty to engage with architectural space as they find it. In fact, as Charley suggests, all fiction must deal with or respond to space to some extent – it being a given fact of the world to which literature responds – and this space will very often include architecture.¹¹ Fiction, freed from the need to intervene, is at liberty to consider architecture just one of the many elements that go to make up everyday experience, and it is also able to use architecture for other ends: to explore ideas that have some, little or no relation to the transformation of built space. In short, literature tends not to constitute an intervention in urban space, whereas architecture does.

‘An almost permanent construction site’

As I have already suggested, all of the literary texts examined in this thesis are interested to some extent in a moment or moments of change or transformation, and this interest is tied up with their interest in architectural space. To put it another way, they all use architecture to write about change. Moreover, the texts’ relationships to the architectural spaces which they use, and the wider changes or trends which these architectural spaces are used to articulate, are very often antagonistic.

Change, OMA suggested in its exhibition, is anathema to London, and the architects identified ‘modernity’ and ‘modernism’ as types, or moments, of change that London has shied away from. This thesis argues the contrary, and insists that a sense of change or transformation is key to understanding architecture in twentieth-century London, and in particular literary representations of that architecture. London does indeed, as OMA suggests, have a peculiarly nuanced connection to modernity, and to modernism. It is the capital of a country radically altered by the technologies of the Industrial Revolution, and was the centre, governmentally and culturally, of an empire that harnessed such technological development to leave an indelible mark on the rest of the globe. But, as OMA also states, this is a city that has, in some – although by no means all – senses, resisted ‘the obligation to modernise’. It is largely bereft, for example, of spaces comparable to the meticulously planned squares and boulevards of Haussmann’s Paris, that archetype of nineteenth-century urban modernity; Kingsway (Figure 1) is a rare example of a

¹¹ Charley, ‘Time, Space and Narrative’, p.10.

Haussmann-like thoroughfare, and while there are a few areas of London which received the attention of town planners prior to the twentieth century – Georgian

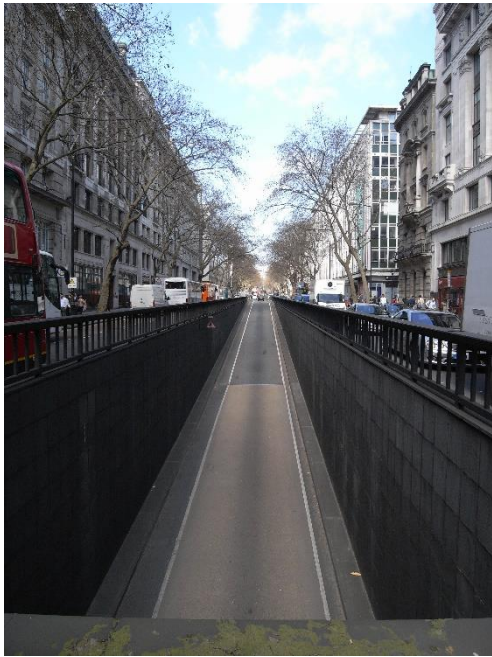


Figure 1, Kingsway

Bloomsbury and Regent Street, for example – these tend to predate the city's nineteenth-century expansion too. Meanwhile modernism did not make a large-scale impact on the city, or the rest of Britain, until reconstruction was necessitated by the devastation of the Blitz, and the fruits of that post-war project have often been, and in some quarters continue to be, vilified.¹²

But while it is right to diagnose a certain architectural conservatism and a tendency, by and large, to build and rebuild in a fashion that is gradual and piecemeal rather than sweeping and revolutionary, it

would be wrong to suggest that London's recent history has been characterised largely by stasis. The Blitz and subsequent rebuilding are just one chapter in the life of a city marked not only by the ebb and flow of cycles of destruction and reconstruction, but also by relentless expansion outwards. Taken together, Phillips suggests, these two characteristics create an effect specific to London: a potentially disconcerting tension between, on the one hand, the centuries old London, tracing its roots back to the Roman settlement, and, on the other, the reality of modern London, the former constituting only a very small proportion of the latter.¹³ Moreover, the nature of this disjunction between imagined 'historical' London and 'real' London is subject to continuous shifts and changes as the city is altered around its inhabitants, a process that reaches its apex in post-war reconstruction. It is a discordant, contradictory city, with a tumultuous and disjointed history written in its architecture, and the twentieth century saw some of the most violent, drastic, creative and widespread alterations to the city to date. It is perhaps not surprising that this

¹² Similarly, it is only in recent decades that London has built its own versions of the skyscrapers that are the hallmark of both modernism and postmodernism. Results have been mixed.

¹³ Phillips, *London Narratives*, pp.1-4.

change should often be met with suspicion, anxiety, even fear, and that these responses should be expressed in contemporaneous literature.

Architecture as ‘unavoidable fact’ and literary device

In his account of post-Second World War bombsites and British literary culture Leo Mellor describes the blitzed ruins as ‘an unavoidable fact on the ground’. His study argues that

such material conditions provide the subject of many works, whether overtly or implicitly. It also argues for the significance of the more abstracted value of these spaces (whether theological, metaphorical, allegorical) for the narrative and iconographies of British culture, both then and now.¹⁴

This thesis operates on the assumption that what Mellor says is true of bombsites is equally true of architecture that is whole and undamaged. Some spaces will – in a certain time and for certain people, writers and non-writers alike – have a particular, charged, ‘abstracted value’. The bombsite is one such space, but the post-war housing block is potentially just as charged a space as the ruin it covers. (And crucially, as Mellor alludes to with ‘then and now’, it will have a different significance in 1965 than it will in 2015.) Returning to the example of ‘Thunder at Wembley’, Woolf engages with and subverts the ‘abstracted value’ of the Exhibition buildings, which is the image of Empire that they are intended to project. Not all buildings, of course, have quite so stark a narrative attached to them as the ‘Palaces’ of the British Empire Exhibition, but all buildings are charged in some way with ‘abstracted value’, and it is this that makes them useful vehicles in literature.

Change, I have suggested, will be an important thread running through the thesis. The literary texts I have chosen very often take architectural space as a point at which competing tensions collide, and thus use it as a way to register moments of personal, social, political or cultural change. Within these moments of change or transition architecture frequently stands for a past or an imagined future, be it a cherished bygone idyll, a hoped for utopia, or a feared projection. Sometimes the change that is being registered is explicitly architectural, whereas in some instances

¹⁴ Leo Mellor, *Reading the Ruins: Modernism, Bombsites and British Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), p.2.

the architecture becomes a way to articulate other concerns. Whether it be the former or the latter – and it is often both at once – it is undoubtedly the case that architecture can offer a visible expression and therefore an historical document of wider shifts, so it is apt that writers should use it to register something of those transformations. It is also the case that fiction was one of the arenas in which debates about the present or future state of architecture were played out. It is in these ways that the texts I consider can be said to be ‘about’ architecture.

These moments of change are both a way to read my chosen texts and a way to organise the thesis more broadly. I have been careful not to try and construct a great sweeping narrative detailing the relationship between literature and architecture for much of the twentieth century. Rather I have looked to identify a series of moments of particular interest, which in the context of this thesis has meant moments of significant change or transition; or perhaps it would be more accurate to say that I have chosen those moments which serve to make a particular shift most visible to us from our twenty-first-century vantage point. For example, the monumental changes in technology, culture and politics that are most visible to us in the years immediately following the First World War in fact came about during the Edwardian era, if not before.¹⁵ Similarly, post-Second World War reconstruction, which seems in many ways to set a drastic new course for British architecture, actually had its theoretical, if not so much its material, roots in the Britain of the 1930s.¹⁶ Thus the two wars serve as historical focal points for thinking about transformations that in reality took place over a more protracted and less easily defined period of time. The result of this approach has been a tendency to look at literary texts which are clustered around a particular moment or series of related moments, and there are occasionally considerable gaps between these clusters.

¹⁵ Samuel Hynes, *The Edwardian Turn of Mind* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1968), p.5.

¹⁶ John Summerson, *Architecture in England Since Wren* (London: Longmans, Green and Co., 1948), pp.17-18.

Architecture and Spatiality in Criticism and Theory

‘A vocabulary of spatial and geographical terms’, Andrew Thacker observed in 2003, ‘is becoming increasingly familiar to those working in literary studies’.¹⁷ Questions of space and spatiality are now commonplace in literary criticism, and urban space in particular is, unsurprisingly, a central concern in the study of the literature of the twentieth century. Thacker’s book is an interesting example of a study that addresses space largely as a theoretical category. ‘Psychic space’, ‘social space’, ‘gendered space’ and ‘domestic space’ are all explored, but with very little reference to the architectural space that must necessarily, in some sense, contain them all. In contrast, other recent studies have in part considered the implications of planning and architecture, and how these implications have been reflected or played out in literature, for example Phillips’s study of post-war London fiction and a collection of essays on literature, architecture and the modern city edited by Charley and Sarah Edwards, as well as readings of Wyndham Lewis by Andrzej Gasiorek and Kate Armond.¹⁸ Yet none of these has undertaken a sustained engagement with the non-literary discourse around architecture, and in particular with the kinds of architectural texts upon which this thesis will draw. Any such analysis is relatively brief and isolated around the reading of a particular literary text, rather than a range of texts spanning several decades. Peter Kalliney’s engagement with the discourse around architectural space in England during the twentieth century is, however, more extended. In the course of his study Kalliney looks to unpack the ‘deployment of class difference as a site of fierce symbolic contestation’, and it is to this end that he brings architectural space into his analysis.¹⁹ This approach is not so much interested in class as ‘a social and political reality’ but rather understands it as ‘a contentious, unstable point around which cultural texts are structured’.²⁰

Taunton, meanwhile, has a different, more material emphasis: the home. Here the focus is on the fictional representation of this material reality, and Taunton uses

¹⁷ Andrew Thacker, *Moving Through Modernity: Space and Geography in Modernism* (Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 2003), p.1.

¹⁸ Edwards and Charley (eds.), *Writing the Modern City*; Andrzej Gasiorek, “‘Architecture or Revolution?’ Le Corbusier and Wyndham Lewis”, in *Geographies of Modernism: Literatures, Cultures, Spaces*, ed. by Peter Brooker and Andrew Thacker (Oxford and New York: Routledge, 2005), pp.136-145; Kate Armond, ‘Wyndham Lewis and the Parables of Expressionist Architecture’, *Modernist Cultures*, vol. 9, 282-303.

¹⁹ Peter J. Kalliney, *Cities of Affluence and Anger: A Literary Geography of Modern Englishness* (Charlottesville and London: University of Virginia Press, 2007), p.4.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p.3.

fiction as a way to access the subjective experience of inhabiting housing, something which is often not conveyed by the other texts he is interested in, namely the writings of architects and urban planners. To consider both literary and architectural texts alongside one another, Taunton suggests, is to read the issue of housing dialectically.²¹

My reading of literary representations of architecture draws on both of these approaches, focussing on both material reality and the symbolic. Like Kalliney I am interested in the symbolic value of architectural spaces in literature – that which Mellor calls the ‘abstracted value’ of architectural spaces – and in how that value is contested through this literature. I take architectural space to be a ‘point’ around and through which certain textual moments are structured. In common with Taunton’s approach I too will read my chosen literary texts alongside developments in architecture and urbanism, and with a persistent focus on those ways in which the former responds to the latter. I am also similarly interested in how literature might provide access to subjective experience. But whereas Taunton’s study takes as its focus the lived reality of architecture as it pertains to the issue of housing, this thesis addresses points at which literary texts use architectural space to articulate something related to but simultaneously beyond the lived reality of that space – to describe also something of the experience of mechanised modernity, or of living through the Blitz, or of moving amongst the ruins, or whatever it may be. It is in this sense that I am interested in both the real and the symbolic – in the movement between the two and in the points at which they overlap.

My approach to thinking about text, the city and the relationship between the two has been informed by the work of Michel de Certeau, and in particular *The Practice of Everyday Life*. While I do not draw on his theories directly in the course of my readings they underpin the thesis’s assumption that an individual’s interaction with an architectural space is never passive or neutral. Certeau’s theoretical distinction between ‘strategies’ and ‘tactics’ is of particular significance here. He uses this distinction to deconstruct the assumed binary opposition of ‘production’ and ‘consumption’, in which an institution, a government, a company ‘produces’, then the individual or collective ‘consumes’. It is his contention that the notion of a

²¹ Taunton, *Fictions of the City*, p.6.

passive ‘consumption’ obscures the fact that it is an inherently active, creative process:

To a rationalised, expansionist and at the same time centralised, clamorous, and spectacular production corresponds another production, called ‘consumption.’ The latter is devious, it is dispersed, but it insinuates itself everywhere, silently and almost invisibly, because it does not manifest itself through its own products, but rather through its ways of using the products imposed by a dominant economic order.²²

The ‘production’ is a ‘strategy’, the ‘consumption’ – which is always also a form of production – is a ‘tactic’. This provides a useful framework within which to think about architectural space, the design and construction of architecture being strategic, its inhabitation (its *use*) tactical. Certeau makes the tactical visible, revealing the individual’s role in architecture and placing emphasis upon that use of architectural space. This function is usefully articulated by another of his theoretical distinctions, namely that of ‘place’ and ‘space’:

A place is the order (of whatever kind) in accord with which elements are distributed in relationships of coexistence. It thus excludes the possibility of two things being in the same location. [...] It implies an indication of stability. A *space* exists when one takes into consideration vectors of direction, velocities, and time variables. Thus space is composed of intersections of mobile elements. It is in a sense actuated by the ensemble of movements deployed within it. [...] In short, *space is a practised place*. Thus the street geometrically defined by urban planning is transformed into a space by walkers.²³ [Emphasis in the original.]

And the building designed by an architect is transformed into a ‘space’ by those that inhabit it, however momentarily. Thus ‘space’ is the local, the ‘micro’ of lived experience – *and of literature* – as distinct from ‘place’: the ‘macro’ of the building as a physical presence, as a distinct, delimited area.

Henri Lefebvre’s *The Production of Space* will also tacitly inform my account of literature and architecture in the twentieth century. The implications of his assertion that ‘(Social) space is a (social) product’²⁴ have similarly underpinned

²² Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, trans. by Steven Rendall (Berkeley, Los Angeles and London: University of California Press, 1988), pp.xii-xiii.

²³ *Ibid.*, p.117.

²⁴ Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, trans. by Donald Nicholson-Smith (Oxford: Blackwell, 1991), p.26.

my thinking, particularly in relation to the manner in which social relations and conditions are structured in and through architectural space. In many of the texts under consideration in the course of this thesis the change that is afoot is social as well as architectural. Social change equals a change in social relations or conditions, and social relations and conditions are inherently material and spatial. Consequently architectural spaces, when incorporated into a literary text, are readily indicative or illustrative of a wider social shift.

Moment, Fragment, Individual

In some sense this thesis is a survey, in so much as its historical scope is wide and I look at a range of different authors and texts, often united only by place, or even just certain kinds of spaces. Taken together they constitute a considerable body of work that is interested in the built environment, and each of the texts represents a moment in which architectural space itself was undergoing some sort of change that was deemed worthy of a response, or a moment in which architectural space was deemed the best way to register some other, less solid, more immaterial change. (Very often both of these statements will be true of the text in question.) In a few instances an author's vision or hope or fear was rather singular, but in far more cases it tapped into or sought to represent or engage with a mood or set of ideas that had some degree of common currency. Some texts, inevitably, are more directly engaged with the conversations that were occurring simultaneously in architectural circles than others. There are also certain points across the period under consideration during which there was a greater tendency towards this kind of engagement; these moments arose when architectural questions became particularly pressing, for example during reconstruction.

The moment – or more broadly the momentary, fragmentary, or individual – is key to the way the thesis is structured and organised, but it also emerges and re-emerges throughout the thesis as a central thematic concern, as I suggested when reading 'Thunder at Wembley'. In that essay Woolf elevates the ordinary individuals that people the Exhibition, and their experience of that space in the moment, above the spectacle itself and its hollow rhetoric; the individual consciousness undoes the logic of a vast, totalising architectural space. A comparable dynamic between literature and architecture is played out throughout the thesis. Through providing an

account of the individual and their relation to and interactions with architectural space, literature communicates the lived experience of architecture, supplying a 'micro' history that is both a constituent of and a remedy against the macroscopic lens of architectural history. In its prioritisation of individual consciousness the literary moment shows architectural space in use – as lived – in a way that a contemporaneous architectural text, or even more so a later account, cannot.

Literature's attention to this 'micro' perspective shifts and changes its emphasis at different points during the twentieth century, and thus at different points in this thesis. Texts produced during the Edwardian era and the inter-war period expressed, I will argue, the concern that the individual was not being properly served by modernity, or even that the individual might end up being dominated by or subsumed into a new, dangerous architecture, while specifically post-First World War texts describe a newfound distrust of previously familiar spaces. In both of these instances there was a concurrent retreat to fragments of older architecture, in search of a kind of solace. In the literature of the Blitz, architecture's assumed solidity was undermined in both the day-to-day reality and the imagination of the population. It became a visceral experience, something to be confronted in the moment. Meanwhile the post-war reconstruction debate offered precious little space for individual recovery from the trauma of the bombs, being concerned for the most part with sweeping away the ruins and rebuilding in their place. Literature, however, was able to insist once again upon the importance of the individual and the momentary.

Modernism(s)

At a number of different points in the twentieth century, architecture, it was claimed, would radically transform people's lives for the better. For various different reasons, and in various different ways, the literary texts I read in this thesis were often highly suspicious of these projects, or simply felt that they had failed in one way or another. As I have already suggested, modernism was often key to this sense that it was possible to plan and build towards a better future. (Although projects that were conceived of as an alternative to, or a compromise with, modernist architecture and urbanism, but that were touted as similarly transformative – for example the New Towns – also emerged.) Consequently modernism is an important concern of this

thesis, but it not so much a thread running through it as something to which I will return at some point in each chapter.

Of all the writers I address only Wyndham Lewis, Elizabeth Bowen and William Sansom could have the label ‘modernist’ uncontroversially applied to their writing, and even then only Lewis is a canonical ‘high’ modernist. This is, of course, due to the fact that much of the thesis is concerned not just with the years after the high modernist 1920s but also with the years post-1939, by which time, twentieth-century criticism suggests, modernism was ‘over’. Although recent criticism has looked to extend literary modernism’s life deeper into the inter-war years and then beyond 1939 – and terms such as Tyrus Miller’s ‘late modernism’ and Kristin Bluemel’s ‘intermodernism’ have been instrumental in this endeavour – this thesis does not attempt to make an argument about the historical parameters of modernism.²⁵ My engagement with literary modernism takes place at the level of the individual text, and I am less interested in making an argument about modernism as either a literary mode or a critical category than I am in attending to the ways in which the modernism of particular texts relates to their use of architectural space. In reading modernist texts alongside less experimental, even middlebrow, works I have to some extent heeded Andrzej Gąsiorek’s warning that

distinctions between ‘realist’ and ‘experimental’ or between ‘traditional’ and ‘innovative’, which were of such significance to the modernists and the avant-garde in the earlier part of the century, are so irrelevant to the post-war period that they should be dropped altogether.²⁶

In my original conception of the thesis modernism had a somewhat more predominant role to play. It was initially modernism – and specifically the unusually late arrival of modernist architecture in Britain and its coincidence with post-war reconstruction – that drew me to thinking about literature and architecture together. Why should the genesis of British literary modernism be generally taken to be Edwardian, with its apotheosis coming during the 1920s, when its architectural counterpart simply did not exist in any material form until the 1920s, and had to wait

²⁵ Tyrus Miller, *Late Modernism: Politics, Fiction, and the Arts Between the World Wars* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1999); Kristin Bluemel (ed.), *Intermodernism: Literary Culture in Mid-Twentieth-Century Britain* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2009).

²⁶ Andrzej Gąsiorek, *Post-War British Fiction: Realism and After* (London: Edward Arnold, 1995), p.v.

until 1945 to become seriously established? In the course of my research this question gradually fell by the wayside, largely because I ceased to see literary and architectural modernism as ‘counterparts’ in any meaningful way. At a time when critics have increasingly – as Peter Nicholls suggested that they should – thought in terms of ‘modernisms’ rather than ‘modernism’, it would be at best unhelpful and at worst inaccurate to speak of the modernism of literature and of architecture as if they were the same thing.²⁷ Consequently I have been careful not to suggest that writers and architects were somehow equivalent – that they were doing different versions of essentially the same thing. There are certainly moments of connection, but there are even more moments of disconnection and deviation, of tension and opposition. In the course of this thesis I am equally interested in these moments of disconnection as I am in moments of connection.

Architecture in Writing

Literary texts are, of course, at the centre of my analyses, but my engagement with architecture also very often takes place at the level of the text. Throughout the thesis I am as interested in what was being written about architecture by architects and critics as I am in what was actually being built. This approach, as Ellis Woodman suggests, is particularly appropriate to the study of architecture:

Sifting through the history of architecture one encounters successive polemical texts that have impacted on the imaginations of practitioners with a frankly inexplicable force. Certainly, it is hard to think of which other artistic discipline has proved quite so susceptible to the promptings of the written word. Where in the history of painting or of cinema, or of opera is the manifesto that has exerted the influence that could be claimed for, say, Le Corbusier’s *Vers Une Architecture*?²⁸

There is indeed an unusually direct and observable link between what has been written about building and buildings, and what has been built, but my approach also has more practical motivations: I often look to texts as records of architectural spaces

²⁷ Peter Nicholls, *Modernisms: A Literary Guide* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1995).

²⁸ Ellis Woodman, ‘Foreword’, in Colin St John Wilson, *The Other Tradition of Modern Architecture: The Uncompleted Project* (London: Black Dog Publishing, 2007), pp.8-11.

which no longer exist, as a record of critical or public opinion, or as a record of the professed intentions of architects and planners.

Over all four of my chapters I draw on a range of what I have thus far been calling architectural texts, and I draw particularly heavily on *The Architectural Review*. Throughout I am careful not to present the opinions of critics and architects as being homogenous when they were not, and *The Architectural Review* is particularly useful in this endeavour. The journal's editorial policy – particularly under the influence of James Maude Richards and Hubert de Cronin Hastings, who edited the journal for much of the period in question – was to draw together different, often contradictory opinions. As Alexandra Harris describes, the journal was at once 'a mouthpiece for modernist thinkers' and 'where the English learned about the latest in European architectural thought', as well as being 'peppered with forays into subjects – architectural and miscellaneous – whose contemporary credentials were less immediately apparent'.²⁹

Chapter 1 is the least historically specific of all the chapters in this thesis, in so much as it covers a number of distinct historical moments. Through readings of texts by H.G. Wells, E.M. Forster, Richard Aldington, Ford Madox Ford, Wyndham Lewis and Evelyn Waugh I explore three moments and their related preoccupations: the Edwardian era and the place of both the machine and the country house in its artistic imaginary; the years following the First World War and the experience of returning combatants; and the emergence of the first shoots of a British architectural modernism during the inter-war decades. I argue that each of these texts uses architectural space to create a dialogue with the past or an imagined future, or both. The chapter as a whole sets the thematic parameters for the rest of the thesis, and shows some of the ways in which writers were using architectural space to think about moments of change and transition before the violence of the Blitz and the necessity of reconstruction made this a far more pressing theme.

In the second and third chapters I expand the definition of architectural space to include ruins. I do so because I argue that a number of texts treat ruins in a manner that is comparable to other texts' treatment of whole buildings, which is to say as spaces that lend themselves to thinking about moments of change or transition. (If anything, ruins, evocative of a now lost past, lend themselves even more readily to

²⁹ Alexandra Harris, *Romantic Moderns: English Writers, Artists and the Imagination from Virginia Woolf to John Piper* (London: Thames & Hudson, 2010), p.43.

this treatment.) Chapter 2 focuses on the Blitz and the initial stage of ruination – the moment of destruction. Underpinning the chapter is the question of how both writers and architects should respond to the war, a problem that was articulated publicly at the time in literary and architectural journals. Writers, I argue, were pushed to find new ways to write about this newly, and dangerously, *active* architecture, and I look at this concern with the forms and limits of representation amongst writers alongside what I identify as a turn towards documentation amongst architects. For the writers in this chapter – Elizabeth Bowen, John Strachey and William Sansom – change is not something in the past, or in an imagined future. It is not something social or political, or even, in the traditional sense, architectural. It is something immediate and visceral. It is violent change: the transformation of a building by fire or collapse.

Chapter 3 is interested in attitudes towards post-war reconstruction at a time when it was still largely, or entirely, hypothetical. Beginning with plans drawn up while the war was still raging, and following the debate through until 1956, I contrast an enthusiasm for reconstruction amongst architects, commentators and the general public with the deep sense of unease that is articulated in works by Evelyn Waugh, William Sansom, Rose Macaulay, Graham Greene and Rumer Godden. There is here a desire to cling to the ruins – as painful as that may be – and to resist, or at least view with suspicion, that which would go up in their place.

The literary texts considered in Chapter 4 all engage with the narrative of reconstruction's 'failure' that began to emerge in the mid-1950s. These three novels by Angus Wilson, B.S. Johnson and J.G. Ballard are all sustained literary engagements with the realities of post-war architecture: with the spaces it produced and the language through which it was both conceived and perceived. But at the same time as engaging with this very public conversation they are all equally if not more preoccupied, I argue, with using architecture as a way to explore individual psychology. To this extent these texts serve to exemplify the kind of literary move that I look to identify throughout the thesis – namely an engagement with an architecture that is informed by and in response to the contemporaneous architectural scene, but that also keeps its distance and uses architecture as a means to articulate other concerns.

1. ‘Irresistible change’, ‘domestic pastoralism’ and ‘machine-made man’, 1909-1939

On 31st March 1927 Professor Hubert Worthington addressed a group of students at the Royal Institute of British Architects’ annual prize-giving. His subject was modernism in architecture, and he told his audience,

We cannot wave aside this great spirit of the age with a die-hard gesture. We cannot sit for ever and ever like old colonels in a club. In religion, in politics, and in the whole realm of ideas there is an irresistible change going on. We are afraid of what we do not understand, and the less we understand it the more we rant against it.

But there is something there. It cannot be suppressed, nor should we wish to suppress it; it is vital and progressive. We should rather try and guide it into safe channels.³⁰

Worthington’s address – with its acknowledgement of a certain fearfulness and a self-conscious clinging to the past, coupled with a frisson of excitement – usefully registers something of the complex and multifarious response to the emergence of modernist architecture, as well as to some of the profound changes with which it was co-incident, in Britain during the first half of the twentieth century. In the course of this chapter I want to address three different historical moments: the Edwardian era, the years immediately following the conclusion of the First World War, and the emergence of modernist architecture in Britain during the inter-war years. In doing so I will offer readings of a small cluster of texts from each historical moment. The texts I have chosen all consider the moment out of which they were written to be in some sense a transition – a point at which radical change is either possible or already well under way. That change might be social, cultural or personal, sometimes a mix of more than one, or all three at once. It might be met with fear, tentative optimism, or great enthusiasm. Moreover, and crucially, in each case architectural space is a key vehicle for the text’s examination of that transitional moment.

The first moment I will consider is the Edwardian era, and I will begin in 1909, the year of the publication of the Futurist manifesto. In taking this year as my starting point I do not intend to suggest that it marked the beginning of a particular

³⁰ ‘Modern Movement in Architecture: Reaction Against “Pretty Pretty”’, 1 February, 1927, *The Manchester Guardian*, p.14.

kind of writing about architecture, or even of a special interest in architectural matters. What I do want to suggest is that the machine took on a particular importance in the artistic imaginary, as evidenced not only by the Futurist manifesto but also by H.G. Wells's *Tono-Bungay* and E.M. Forster's 'The Machine Stops'. My reading of the latter two texts will also introduce domestic space as an important thread running through the chapter, and discussions of both Hermann Muethesius's *The English House* and Forster's *Howards End* will identify in particular the English country house tradition as a key concern. Next I will turn to the immediate post-First World War years and to accounts from Richard Aldington and Ford Madox Ford of how traumatic experiences in France and Belgium spilled over into the spaces of home. Finally I will consider the emergence of modernist architecture in Britain between the wars through readings of two drastically different texts: Wyndham Lewis's *The Caliph's Design* and Evelyn Waugh's *Decline and Fall*.

A number of recurring ideas will draw these apparently disparate texts together: challenges to or adaptations of the English domestic architectural tradition; mechanisation, and in particular its relationship to domestic space; questions of tradition and authenticity often arise, and the two are sometimes in opposition to one another; the figure of Le Corbusier is persistently used to stand synecdochically for modernist architecture and architects. Above all, in each one of these texts, architectural space is a point at which competing tensions meet.

This chapter will serve to set the parameters for the thesis more broadly. In general the texts considered here – and indeed across the thesis as a whole, as I suggested in my introduction that they must – use architectural space to expose crises rather than to offer solutions: to reflect a wider unease rather than to directly and practically intervene in the question of how built space should be organised.³¹

'Something morbidly expanded': H.G. Wells and E.M. Forster

'The 1900s,' writes Philipp Blom in his account of the Edwardian era, 'were nothing if not dynamic. Everything appeared bigger today than it had yesterday: cities, industrial production, railway networks, streets with automobiles hurtling along, high-rise buildings with stern façades, populations, media and entertainment, mass

³¹ In this *The Caliph's Design* is such an unusual exception that it proves the rule.

culture, speed records'.³² Much of this dynamism, as Blom's choice of examples suggests, was the result of increasing mechanisation – of the literal acceleration of everyday life through technology. It is thus no surprise that 'the machine' should have taken on such a pivotal role in the artistic imaginary of the Edwardian era, and that it should have been in different ways and for different reasons figured as a cause for both fervent optimism and fear. The Futurist manifesto, first published in *Le Figaro* on 20th February 1909, is one of the most famous and idiosyncratic examples of the former: a brash text that proclaims F.T. Marinetti and company's intention 'to hymn man at the steering wheel, the ideal axis of which intersects the earth, itself hurled ahead in its own race along the path of its orbit'. Speed – and, crucially, the machines that make such rapid movement possible – will do away with the 'ancestral lethargy' of the present.³³ 1909 saw the publication of two other texts over which the shadow of the machine looms large, and it is these that I will be focussing upon in the coming pages. In the dystopian world of E.M. Forster's 'The Machine Stops' – published in the November issue of the *Oxford and Cambridge Review* – technology serves not to thrill and exhilarate, but to dehumanise the population. Meanwhile, H.G. Wells's novel *Tono-Bungay*, which first appeared in the same month as Marinetti's manifesto, offers a more nuanced understanding of the possibilities afforded by increasing mechanisation than either the Futurists or Forster, and it is to this text that I want to turn first of all.

The creation of new technologies, of new machines, is central to Wells's novel, and the narrative is full of the dynamism and energy of what one of its central characters, Edward Ponderevo, calls 'Development' and 'Growth'.³⁴ But there is another current – or, to use Wells's own phrase, 'presence' (p.51) – within the novel, one that is altogether more static: the English house. The particular house in question is Bladesover House, the stately home of which the narrator George Ponderevo's mother was the housekeeper. As such it occupies a central position in the story of George's early life, being as it is the site of many formative childhood experiences. But Bladesover has another, less tangible and altogether more pervasive, presence in

³² Philipp Blom, *The Vertigo Years: Change and Culture in the West, 1900-1914* (London: Phoenix, 2009), pp.394-395.

³³ F.T. Marinetti, 'The Founding and the Manifesto of Futurism', in *Modernism: An Anthology*, ed. by Lawrence Rainey, (Malden, Massachusetts: Backwell, 2005), pp.3-6 (pp.3-4).

³⁴ H.G. Wells, *Tono-Bungay* (London: Pan Books, 1978), p.46. Subsequent references to this edition are given in parentheses within the main body of the text.

George's life, and in Wells's text. Less than a quarter of the way into the novel George announces:

This is the last I shall tell of Bladesover. The drop-scene falls on that, and it comes no more as an actual presence into this novel. [...] But in a sense Bladesover has never left me [...]. Bladesover illuminates England [...]. It is my social datum (p.51).

When George states that he grew up 'in the shadow of Bladesover House' (p.6) he refers not so much to his proximity to 'that fair large house, dominating church, village, and the countryside' (p.7), but rather to the social relations that are enshrined in and enacted within and through this landscape. In childhood George conceived of 'the Bladesover system' as 'a little working model – and not so little either – of the whole world' (p.6). His childish assumption that the rest of the world could be no different from his own surroundings turns out, as he realises upon his arrival in London, to have some truth in it. However, it is not, of course, the case that in a post-industrial nation the Bladesover system is reproduced again and again in its entirety, but rather that it informs – is indeed the foundation of – social relations all over England. Bladesover is a type of English society in its totality.

In London, George engages in some 'social comparative anatomy', recognising the 'shape' of Bladesover in the fabric of the city. He finds aesthetic similarities between the urban and country house settings, particularly in 'all those regions about the West End parks, [...] estate parks, each more or less in relation to a palace or group of great houses', and notes too that 'the roads and backways of Mayfair [...] were of the very spirit and architectural texture of the Bladesover passages and yards'. He sees that the Natural History Museum 'is the little assemblage of cases of stuffed birds and animals upon the Bladesover staircase grown enormous', and that the other great museums and libraries of the city are similarly like private collections of the gentleman amateur that 'have escaped out of the Great House altogether, and taken on a strange independent life of their own'. Crucially, it is not just the spaces of the city that he recognises; he discovers too that the social relations of Bladesover are intact in London, and encoded in those very spaces. George recalls that, in his youth, London still contained '[t]he proper shops for Bladesover custom', and that he 'found the doctor's house of the country village or country town up and down Harley Street, multiplied but not otherwise different'.

London, then, is a city ‘of escaping parts [...] of proliferating and overgrowing elements from the Estates’; it is Bladesover expanded but not exploded, altered but not transformed. And this is ‘the best explanation, not simply of London, but of all England’ (pp.80-81).

Hermann Muthesius’s *The English House* (published in three volumes, the first two in 1904 and the last in 1905) also identifies the large country house as the key source for contemporary English architecture. Muthesius, a German national sent to London by Kaiser Wilhelm II as cultural and technical attaché, and an architect in his own right, calls the English house the bearer of ‘the sceptre of architecture’, and argues that, from the Early Modern period onwards, ‘architectural developments in England can be traced by reference to the private house, each new wave of taste leaving its mark on domestic architecture’.³⁵ He credits an ‘inborn love of country life’ as the reason for the continued popularity of houses, as opposed to flats, in England, arguing that only the individual house permits the close relationship with the natural world that the people of England desire (p.1). This love, Muthesius argues, was strengthened rather than diminished by industrialisation and the consequent urbanisation of the population. The English remain rural in their instincts: ‘In England one does not “live” in the city, one merely stays there’; those ‘who are obliged to live in the city at least rent a country-house in some pleasantly situated village’ for weekend and holiday visits (p.2). Like Wells, Muthesius takes the country house and Englishness to be inextricably linked. But if Wells does this by including all of England in the figure of the country house and its surroundings, then Muthesius makes a claim for the primacy of the house through a process of exclusion. In Muthesius’s history England is made up almost entirely of people who own one or more large houses, with the occasional glimpse of the ‘man of modest circumstances’ – and even he takes it as ‘a matter of course that he should live in his own house’ (p.5). Yet in spite of their rather different emphases, both writer and architect accord the country house a central place in the nation’s past and present.

Muthesius asserts too that ‘[p]resent-day English architecture has grown out of the revival of the traditions of early vernacular building and the modern Arts and Crafts movement’ (p.219). A contemporaneous article in *The Architectural Review*

³⁵ Hermann Muthesius, *The English House*, ed. by Dennis Sharp, trans. by Janet Seligman and Stewart Spencer, 3 vols (London: Frances Lincoln, 2007), I, p38. Subsequent references to this edition are given in parentheses within the main body of the text.

makes the same claims when it demands that measures be put in place as a matter of urgency to preserve '[t]he traditional London house'. The author asks that 'at least a portion of the representative domestic buildings which remain to us' be kept in trust so that they may be "“outpatients” in our National Collection', and he identifies some addresses worthy of this treatment: 'Church Row, Hampstead; Cheyne Walk; Cowley Street, Westminster; Queen Anne's Gate; Great Ormond Street'. These streets 'are examples of the vernacular art of the day'.³⁶ What is striking is that the streets here listed are famous for their examples of Georgian domestic architecture, and thus cannot in any literal sense be said to be 'vernacular art of the day', but rather represent an ideal to which contemporary architects should aspire. Alan Powers suggests that, in drawing upon this vernacular in the years following 1900, architects were consciously concerned with producing an 'English' brand of architecture, and that this 'seems to have been linked to a spreading anxiety about Britain's economic performance in the world at large'.³⁷ It is significant that their concern is with 'Englishness' and not 'Britishness'. In his analysis of the construction of English national identity over the course of the twentieth century, Peter Kalliney identifies the emergence of an 'English exceptionalism in the context of imperial disintegration' in the early twentieth century, an identity that developed at the expense of a less geographically and culturally specific British national identity.³⁸ No longer able to define itself in relation to the 'imperial other', the nation had to seek out another 'set of national symbols' and, Kalliney suggests, it did so by 'renovating an indigenous geography', so that 'domestic space became the site through which the nation staged its cultural distinctiveness'.³⁹

Kalliney notes also that some of the leading figures within the architectural profession lagged somewhat behind this inward-looking trend, as a number of the most famous architectural projects undertaken in London both before, during and after the First World War (he names the Bank of England, the Victoria Memorial and the development of the Strand and its surrounding area) were concerned with 'reimagining metropolitan space in more explicitly imperial terms'. Moreover, he suggests that architects such as Edwin Lutyens and Herbert Baker were engaged in

³⁶ A.E. Street, 'London Street Architecture – II', *The Architectural Review*, vol. 17 (May, 1905), 201-214 (p.201).

³⁷ Alan Powers, *Britain* (London: Reaktion Books, 2007), p.13.

³⁸ Kalliney, *Cities of Affluence and Anger*, pp.7-8.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, pp.27-28.

what he terms ‘the articulation of domestic pastoralism’: while in the colonies they installed modified versions of rural English domestic architecture, intended as manifestations of cultural superiority, at home they were championing ‘the country-house ideal’.⁴⁰ Thus the vernacular forms of English, and specifically English domestic, architecture were harnessed both by those attempting to articulate a national identity in a changing twentieth century and by those looking backwards towards nineteenth-century glories. Approaches to construction itself were also inflected with the vernacular, as familiar materials were retained; brick and Portland stone remained ubiquitous. Alongside this went the adoption of new technologies and techniques, even as familiar forms persisted.⁴¹ The return to the vernacular, then, was not a rejection of modern building practices, but rather of the proto-modernist experiments in form that were being carried out on the Continent by figures such as Auguste Perret. Architects in Britain did not necessarily shy away from using the new materials and techniques afforded them by mechanisation – the most prominent among them being concrete and steel frames, and the pre-fabrication processes that these made possible – but they did tend to resist expressing this novelty in the exterior forms of their buildings.⁴²

This is not to suggest that the Edwardian era saw the harmonious blending of a vernacular country house tradition with ‘the machine’, but rather that architects frequently found ways to turn the latter to the service of the former. However, this co-opting of new technologies could not do away with the perceived menace of the machine. Both Wells and Forster, in very different ways, register worlds radically, even violently, altered by new technology, and in so doing capture something of Britain’s awkward, partial adoption of mechanisation in its most recent forms. In *Tono-Bungay* we are presented with a set piece that describes London being ‘invaded’ by mechanisation. As I have discussed above, Wells describes the city as a Bladesover that has undergone some process of expansion, but has nevertheless kept something of its original ‘shape’. But alongside the recognisable schema of the country house is ‘the presence of great new forces, blind forces of invasion, of growth’, and chief amongst these is the railway, which has ‘butted its great stupid,

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, pp.44-46.

⁴¹ Powers, *Britain*, p.14.

⁴² Powers, *Britain*, p.17. Powers points to a notable exception to this trend in London: the Kodak Warehouse and Offices on Kingsway (1909) by J.J. Burnet. It ‘was noticed at the time as a building where the steel construction, to some extent, could be read off the façade in the form of wider window spans and less surface depth than normal’ (p.23).

rusty iron head of Charing Cross station [...] clean across the river' (p.81). And this expansion is not the 'proliferating and overgrowing' of Bladesover as it is transformed into a city, but rather something akin to a diseased swelling: 'the whole effect of industrial London [the City and the East End] [...] is to me of something disproportionately large, something morbidly expanded', while the rest is 'similar disproportionate growths, endless streets of undistinguished houses, undistinguished industries' which 'suggest [...] the unorganised, abundant substance of some tumorous growth-process' (pp.81-82).

These two 'growths', Wells suggests, do not sit comfortably alongside one another, and, in an extended passage that in places resembles a history textbook, he describes how the machine – in the shape of the railway and the factory – serves to disrupt the traditional class identities that were embodied in Bladesover, and that the recently expanded city has been designed to accommodate (pp.71-72). Specifically, the combination of these new technologies renders the London Bladesovers that existed in more modest, microcosmic form – a wealthy middle-class family with a few servants, living in a large, suburban Victorian house – increasingly impossible. The railways mean that 'moderately prosperous middle-class families' are moving out of London, while 'education and factory employment were whittling away at the supply of rough, hard-working, obedient girls who would stand the suburban drudgery' of servitude in such houses. Simultaneously this same boom meant that 'new classes of hard-up middle-class people such as my uncle, employees of various types, were coming into existence, for whom no homes were provided' (p.72). This creates two related points of tension, one located in the fabric of the city and the other in the minds of its occupants. The existing architecture becomes obsolete once the machine has altered the social relations which that architecture had been intended to accommodate and perpetuate. At the same time there is now a discrepancy between the system that has been collectively internalised as the right and proper way that things should be, and the reality which no longer fits that system: 'None of these classes have ideas of what they ought to be, or fit in any legitimate way into the Bladesover theory that dominates our minds' (p.72).

Edward Ponderevo is the character most closely associated with mechanisation and its capacity to undermine the status quo. The novel follows the rapid ascent and equally rapid decline of his fortunes, which are tied to his patent medicine, Tono-Bungay. Edward's success is due to his willingness to embrace and

harness the possibilities of mechanisation, with the help of his engineer nephew – ‘Come and change it, George,’ Edward insists when first presenting him with the fledgling business, ‘Come here and make a machine of it’ (p.109) – and he is dismissive of the Bladesover system. George recounts that Edward ‘did not believe’ in Bladesover, that he preferred ‘novel and incredible ideas’, that he ‘was the first real breach I found in the great front of Bladesover the world had presented me’ (p.53).

For these reasons Edward’s attitude towards the home is of interest, as he embraces technology not only as a way to shake up the system that is epitomised by the English house, but as a means to radically re-organise domestic space itself. When we first encounter him as a young man in his modest abode he is surrounded by ‘the evidences of recently abandoned toil’, and of particular note is the slogan: ‘The Ponderevo Patent Flat, a Machine you can Live in’ (p.44). Edward wants to re-invent the home, and he wants to use the machine to do it. His slogan pre-dates Le Corbusier’s strikingly similar and often repeated diktat, ‘The house is a machine for living in’.⁴³ Le Corbusier’s words gained currency with the publication of *Vers Une Architecture* in 1923, and would not appear in English until the book was translated, as *Towards a New Architecture*, in 1927. But, Michael Sherborne notes, the phrase ‘had previously circulated among Futurist artists and very likely originated with Wells here’.⁴⁴ Regardless of whether *Tono-Bungay* really is the origin of Le Corbusier’s signature phrase, the fact that it, or something remarkably like it, should have flowed from the pen of Edward Ponderevo at the end of the nineteenth century, and from the pen of H.G. Wells in 1909, demonstrates that thinking through the implications of the machine for ordinary domestic spaces was not simply the preserve of the modernist avant-garde, and marks Edward out as a pioneer. This is confirmed later in the novel by his insistence that, having made a success of Tono-Bungay, ‘We’ve got to bring the Home Up to Date! [...] We got to make a civilised d’mestic machine out of these relics of barbarism’ (p.179).

In the event, Edward does begin the construction of ‘a Twentieth Century house’ decades after first formulating his ‘Machine you can Live in’: Crest Hill, ‘the leading occupation of his culminating years’ (p.227). The fortunes of this building –

⁴³ Le Corbusier, *Towards a New Architecture*, trans. by Frederick Etchells (London: The Architectural Press, 1946), p.10.

⁴⁴ Michael Sherborne, *H.G. Wells: Another Kind of Life* (London and Chicago: Peter Owen, 2012), p.198.

‘which grew and changed its plans as it grew [...] and burgeoned and bulged and evermore grew’ (p.228) – are, like Edward’s, tied to the fortunes of Tono-Bungay, so it is left unfinished at the time of his death. George observes that Edward and Crest Hill are not unique in their fate:

It is curious how many of these modern financiers of chance and bluff have ended their careers by building. It was not merely my uncle. Sooner or later they all seem to bring their luck to the test of realisation, try to make their fluid opulence coagulate out as bricks and mortar, bring moonshine into relation with a weekly wages-sheet. Then the whole fabric of confidence and imagination totters – and down they come... (p.229).

These buildings, and the men that commission them, are produced by and are thus vulnerable to the vagaries of the market, and it is the market that is the root of Wells’s suspicion of novel, mechanised technologies. After his uncle’s death George looks at ‘the huge, abandoned masses of the Crest Hill house’:

‘It struck me suddenly as the compactest image and sample of all that passes for Progress, of all the advertisement-inflated spending, the aimless building up and pulling down, the enterprise and promise of my age. This was our fruit, this was what we had done, I and my uncle, in the fashion of our time. We were its leaders and exponents, we were the thing it most flourishingly produced. [...] For this the armies drilled, for this the Law was administered and the prisons did their duty, for this the millions toiled and perished in suffering, in order that a few of us should build palaces we never finished, [...] scorch about the world in motor-cars, devise flying-machines’ (p.294).

New ideas, new technologies, new buildings, are inextricably linked to the accumulation of capital; it is for this reason that they are at best compromised and at worst undesirable, and not because of anything intrinsic to novelty or mechanisation themselves. Cothope, George’s assistant, puts the matter somewhat more plainly:

It’s a rotten scramble, this world. It takes the things we make and invent and it plays the silly fool with ‘em. We scientific people, we’ll have to take things over and stop all this financing and advertisement and that. It’s too silly. It’s a noosance. Look at us! (p.293).

Muthesius and Wells perceive much the same England: one in which the countryside, with the house at its centre, stands as a blueprint, an ideal. The city, and in particular London, has deviated from this plan. Both lament what they see as London's excessively rapid and unplanned expansion, and liken it to an overgrown village (Muthesius p.2, Wells pp.81-82). As I have suggested, Wells, or at least George Ponderevo, observes that this process has been socially disruptive. Muthesius, meanwhile, is outright anti-urban: urban living, he argues, has a destructive, degenerative effect on individuals, resulting in 'instability, dissipation and shallowness in human society' (p.6). But if they both take the ideal of the country house to be in some essential way at the root of English identity, then Wells sees through the identity for which the house stands in a way that Muthesius does not. Like Muthesius, Wells bemoans the machine's intrusion into the city, but unlike the architect his complaint is not that the intrusion has upset a valuable, established way of life, but rather that it has served to deepen the crisis begun by 'Bladesoverly'.

David Lodge identifies both *Tono-Bungay* and *Howards End* as novels that tackle the 'condition of England' question that had had such currency in the nineteenth century.⁴⁵ The phrase 'condition of England novel' was, Lodge notes, 'often applied to novels which sought to articulate and interpret, in the mode of fiction, the changing nature of English society in an era of economic, political, religious, and philosophical revolution'. He notes too that, '[n]ot only is the question still alive for Wells's generation – the very phrase is still alive', referring in particular to C.F.G. Masterman's *The Condition of England*, 'a book of social criticism in the tradition of Carlyle and Arnold' published in 1909, the same year as *Tono-Bungay*.⁴⁶ The condition that Forster, in common with Masterman, describes is a 'deprivation of a spiritual, cultural and psychological kind which cuts along class divisions'.⁴⁷ Moreover, both writers identify the same cause, as well as the same cure:

Underlying the vision of both men's books is what we may call a pastoral myth, which associates all that is most valuable in human

⁴⁵ David Lodge, 'Introduction', in E.M. Forster, *Howards End* (London: Penguin, 2000), p.xiii; David Lodge, *Language of Fiction* (London and New York: Routledge, 2002), p.230.

⁴⁶ Lodge, *Language of Fiction*, p.230. Lodge adds, 'Masterman had read the page proofs of Wells's novel while preparing his own book, and clearly he was very excited by it, for he frequently alludes to it' (pp.230-231).

⁴⁷ Lodge, 'Introduction', p.xiii.

life with the country and all that is most threatening and corrupting with the city, and maintains that what looks like material progress is actually a process of spiritual decline.⁴⁸

Muthesius, I have already noted, adopts a not dissimilar stance towards the urban and the rural, although he is not nearly so dismissive of the ‘material progress’ of modernity; he accepts it, but with a series of caveats. Wells, meanwhile, is not troubled by the same sense of decline that haunts his three contemporaries – or rather the decline he describes is somewhat different. He is too cynical, too repelled by ‘Bladesoverly’, to find anything like the lost idyll that Forster and Muthesius find embodied in the English house. The decline has already happened and the English house is its product, and thus can offer no protection against it. Yet in spite of this Wells’s novel does register a sense of anxiety about the fact that traditional domestic spaces are under threat from mechanisation, even if that which is threatened is profoundly imperfect itself. In contrast, both *Howards End* and ‘The Machine Stops’ long for a way of life that existed prior to the intervention of the machine, and in particular its intervention into domestic space. I will now turn briefly to the novel before undertaking a reading of the short story.

The motor car is the machine’s only real, literal, persistent presence in *Howards End*. We first encounter it early in the novel in the form of Charles Wilcox’s car, where it serves not only as a vehicle to transport Aunt Juley from the station to Howard’s End, but as a figurative vehicle for her rapidly declining opinion of the driver. (It should be noted that, although the car is a Wilcox possession, it is anathema to the spirit embodied by the family’s home. The vehicle is associated with Charles and Mr Wilcox, not with Mrs Wilcox, *Howards End*’s owner and the character most closely associated with its pastoral power, and who, Lodge notes, ‘is not a Wilcox in spirit’.)⁴⁹ When Aunt Juley first gets into the car it is ‘a luxurious cavern of red leather’.⁵⁰ Once she has tried and failed to question Charles over the details of the assumed love affair between him and Helen, getting only a mystified response, there comes the following description of the cloud of dust that the car has left behind as it passed through a village: ‘Some of it had percolated through the open windows, some had whitened the roses and gooseberries of the wayside

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, p.xv.

⁴⁹ Lodge, ‘Introduction’, p.xvii.

⁵⁰ E.M. Forster, *Howards End* (London: Penguin, 2000), p.14. Subsequent references to this edition are given in parentheses within the main body of the text.

gardens, while a certain proportion had entered the lungs of the villagers'. Charles, observing the scene, comments, 'I wonder when they'll learn wisdom and tar the roads' (pp.15-16). By the time they are making the last leg of their journey to the house Charles is sending 'the motor swerving all over the lane' (p.18). There is clearly more to these descriptions than Aunt Juley's dislike of Charles; the car has polluted its surroundings, so far only to some small extent, but Forster looks to the future imposition of tarmacked roads. The machine will continue to sully the natural world.

Although we first find the Wilcoxes' car within their rural environment, the motor car more generally is closely associated with London, and the qualities with which the car is associated in that first encounter – polluting, a damaging imposition – are qualities with which London too is associated:

And month by month the roads smelt more strongly of petrol, and were more difficult to cross, and human beings heard each other speak with greater difficulty, breathed less of the air, and saw less of the sky. Nature withdrew: the leaves were falling by midsummer; the sun shone through dirt with an admired obscurity (p.92).

This is the grubby, noxious, sickly city that Muthesius describes, and, like the car passing through the village, the place itself has a degenerative effect on those organisms – both human and plant – that live in it. Speed, that quality most readily associated with the machine in general during the Edwardian era, and with the car specifically, has come to define the city. The narrative voice observes, through Margaret's point of view, 'the architecture of hurry' in the city, and 'the language of hurry on the mouths of its inhabitants – clipped words, formless sentences, potted expressions of approval or disgust. Month by month things were stepping livelier, but to what goal?' (p.93). London is characterised by aimless movement, subject to continual acceleration. In endless motion but without a destination, it is mechanistic, almost robotic; it is 'intelligent without purpose' and has 'a heart that certainly beats, but with no pulsation of humanity' (p.92). London is no longer recognisable as a human settlement: 'It lies beyond everything: Nature, with all her cruelty, comes nearer to us than do these crowds of men' (p.92).

Like Wells, Forster is preoccupied with the city's expansion – with its mechanised growth – and this anxiety is expressed in one of two particularly striking

images from the end of the novel. The Schlegel sisters are reflecting on their new-found happiness, and on the sense of security they feel living at Howards End, when Helen observes: ‘All the same, London’s creeping’ (p.289). The city is encroaching upon their idyll, and this creeping menace jars with the image of pastoral rebirth with which the novel closes:

Helen rushed into the gloom, holding Tom by one hand and carrying her baby on the other. There were shouts of infectious joy. ‘The field’s cut!’ Helen cried excitedly – ‘The big meadow! We’ve seen to the very end, and it’ll be such a crop of hay as never!’ (p.293).

The hay ties this final image to the first two descriptions of Mrs Wilcox that appear in the text. The first is from Helen’s letter to Margaret, with which the novel opens. Describing her surroundings and the activities of the Wilcox family at Howards End, Helen recalls watching Mrs Wilcox cross the garden to the meadow and returning ‘with her hands full of the hay that was cut yesterday – I suppose for rabbits or something, as she kept on smelling it’ (p.4). Mrs Wilcox’s second appearance – during Aunt Juley’s disastrous visit to Howards End – consciously echoes this first image of abundance: ‘She approached just as Helen’s letter had described her, [...] and there was actually a wisp of hay in her hands’ (p.19). Thus the novel comes to a somewhat ambiguous end, with the hope that the vital, rural life made possible by Howards End will continue, but also with the prospect of it shortly being engulfed by the mechanised metropolis.

Howards End is indicative of the extent to which Forster was exercised by the idea that modernity in its early twentieth-century form could erode old forms of human relationships – those between people and place as well as interpersonal – and I will argue that ‘The Machine Stops’ exhibits not dissimilar concerns. Moreover, although in the course of this story Forster does not write about the English house – as a work of science fiction the text deals with spaces that intentionally bear no resemblance to the architectural tradition that both he and Muthesius identify – he does register some anxiety about how increasing mechanisation might come to radically alter the ways in which people interact with both built spaces and each other, and thus ‘The Machine Stops’ is usefully read in the company of both

Howards End and *The English House*. Before turning my attention to the story I will again turn briefly to the latter.

At the heart of Muthesius' history is the conviction that the countryside and rural living are absolutely fundamental to English national identity. But he goes further too by suggesting that this tendency to find pleasure in the rural environment is more broadly expressive of a general human instinct possessed by each individual 'to preserve his direct link with nature', and that the private rural house is the site through which this link is preserved (p.3). For this reason, he argues that a house can radically improve the lives of its occupants. Moreover, not only is it important that those who inhabit the house should be able to draw on the natural world in all its vitality, but that, in facilitating this process, the architecture itself must draw upon its natural surroundings, attaining a sort of unity with the environment. This, Muthesius argues, can only be achieved through the use of traditional, locally sourced materials, and through an approach to building that suits the materials; in other words, a vernacular architecture (p.148). In addition, the necessity of furnishing and maintaining a home leads to the occupant being 'directly faced with involvement in the practice of art' (p.7). Thus Muthesius's project suggests an *a priori* relationship between the human body, nature and the arts, one that has been disrupted and obscured by a certain kind of impersonal, mechanistic modernity, typified by urban multi-storeyed domestic dwellings. *The English House* does not espouse a simplistic self-improvement programme through which the population must learn to develop 'good taste' as it is dictated by a privileged artistic intelligentsia. Rather it calls for an architecture that, when properly attuned to the natural world and to human needs, can return humanity to 'our natural state' (p.7). The analysis is an essentially humanist one, and expresses a belief in a fundamental and precious human nature. According to Muthesius it is this and no less that is at stake when houses are designed, built and inhabited.

Forster is a writer in a similarly humanist vein, and 'The Machine Stops' – which posits the natural world as a remedy against the degeneracy of modern society – articulates a comparable unease, and even fear, in the face of an impersonal, mechanistic architecture.⁵¹ Set in a seemingly distant future, 'The Machine Stops'

⁵¹ In a 1947 introduction to his *Collected Short Stories*, Forster described the story as 'a reaction to one of the earlier heavens of H.G. Wells'. E.M. Forster, 'Introduction', in *The New Collected Short Stories* (London: Sidgwick and Jackson, 1985), pp.14-16 (p.15). Sherbourne identifies the Wells text

tells the tale of a young man's desire to escape the oppressive, hive-like world of the Machine, a totalising environment that covers the whole Earth and mediates all of the occupants' contact with each other and with the outside world. Muthesius argues that urban living is degenerative because it is artificial: it prevents contact with the natural world (pp.5-6). Forster's characters, living in an underground city consisting of a network of tiny rooms 'like the cell of a bee', each housing one occupant, have experienced a literal, physical degeneration. Vashti, the first occupant of the Machine that we meet has, we are told, 'a face as white as a fungus', and Forster asks that the reader should '[t]hink of her as without teeth or hair'.⁵² Vashti interrupts her routine of listening to and giving 'lectures' from inside her cell to speak to her son Kuno, 'who lived on the other side of the earth', through the Machine. Kuno asks his mother to come and visit him in person: 'I want to see you not through the Machine [...] I want to speak to you not through the wearisome Machine'. (pp.108-109). When Vashti eventually complies with her son's request and makes her visit Kuno tells her that he has found a way to exit the Machine, to reach the surface (p.120). Part of his preparation for such a journey, he tells his mother, was to build up his muscles so as to be physically able to perform the necessary exertions, human physiognomy having degenerated to the extent that his ability to 'hold the pillow of my bed outstretched for many minutes' has become a feat worthy of note (p.123). Forster explicitly links this physical weakness to a mental decrepitude: an inability to imagine a life that is not bound inextricably to the processes of the Machine. When, after Kuno's journey to the surface and his subsequent recapture, the Machine begins to break down, its inhabitants do little to seek a solution, and Forster identifies their own bodies as the source of their unresponsiveness: '[T]he human tissues in that latter day had become so subservient, that they readily adapted themselves to every caprice of the Machine' (p.135). The human body has stripped itself of the various tools and mechanisms that make up an animal's body and allow it to have freedom of movement, to keep warm, to nourish itself. In losing touch with their embodied humanity, the occupants of the Machine have deprived themselves of these basic, animal freedoms, so that physical

as *A Modern Utopia*, which was serialised in the *Fortnightly Review* between October 1904 and April 1905. Sherborne, *H.G. Wells*, pp.164-165.

⁵² E.M. Forster, 'The Machine Stops', in *The New Collected Short Stories* (London: Sidgwick and Jackson, 1985), pp.108-140 (p.108 & p.113). Subsequent references to this edition are given in parentheses within the main body of the text.

degeneration has contributed profoundly to their loss of agency within the built environment.

In *The English House* private domestic space is considered essential to allowing individuals to become directly and meaningfully involved in organising the space around them, a process that, in turn, allows them to foster connections with the world beyond their walls (pp.5-7). In essence, private space grants the individual agency, both inside and outside of his or her home. The architecture in 'The Machine Stops' has quite the opposite effect on its inhabitants. In Forster's dystopia the form of human existence has been radically altered as the result of an apparently endless desire to keep physical movement to an absolute minimum. Vashti imagines life in bygone eras: 'Those funny old days, when men went for change of air instead of changing the air in their rooms!' (p.113). Contact with other human beings, indeed with any facet of the world beyond the walls of their little cells, is mediated – and thus limited – by technology. The Machine is incapable of replicating unmediated, lived experience: '[T]he Machine did not transmit *nuances* of expression. It only gave a general idea of people – an idea that was good enough for all practical purposes, Vashti thought' (p.110) [emphasis in the original]. It is this lack of what the narration refers to as 'direct experience' (p.114) that drives Kuno to endeavour to escape the Machine, and ultimately to his humanist epiphany – a vision of essential, unadorned humanity – on the surface: 'I felt that humanity existed, and that it existed without clothes. [...] It was naked, humanity seemed naked, and all these tubes and buttons and machineries neither came into the world with us, nor will they follow us out' (p.123).

There is one particularly crucial facet of Kuno's revelatory journey that I want to draw out, and that is the manner in which his endeavour reconnects him to the past. When Kuno exits the Machine – literally breaking out through the crumbling architecture – he finds himself in direct contact with the natural world that he has never truly experienced before. But he also has another novel experience: he senses human history. Moreover, he experiences it as an inspirational, even instructive, presence:

I seemed to hear the spirits of those dead workmen who had returned each evening to the starlight and to their wives, and all the generations who had lived in the open air called back to me, 'You will do it yet, you are coming.' (p.123)

Kuno's sense of history as almost tangible – as something that it is possible to experience *directly* – is crucial here, because of the way in which Forster's text makes links between the accumulation of knowledge and experience, and an individual's creative faculties. The attending and giving of 'lectures' is an important part of daily life for the population of the Machine, as it permits the exchange of 'ideas'. These 'ideas' are the opposite of – and indeed are prized over – 'direct observation'. Vashti tells Kuno that she avoids travelling beyond the confines of her room because sensorial experience actually hampers her capacity to think up new ideas: 'I dislike seeing the horrible brown earth, and the sea, and the stars when it is dark. I get no ideas in an air-ship' (p.110). As the story progresses travel beyond the limits of the machine is eventually banned. In spite of initial complaints from some of the lecturers that this does not allow them 'access to their subject matter', the change is soon accepted as part of the ideology of the Machine, with one particularly 'advanced' lecturer proclaiming, 'Beware of first-hand ideas! [...] First-hand ideas do not really exist' (pp.130-131). Experience is mediated to such an extent that experience and knowledge have become the same thing: experience is now received, it is learned.

In contrast to his fellow Machine-dwellers, Kuno tells Vashti that he had an idea while travelling by air-ship. Kuno sees the constellation of Orion – although he does not know that this is what he is looking at – and recounts to his mother that it looked 'like a man' (p.110). Viewing the collection of stars is an opportunity for a rare 'direct experience', but it also allows Kuno to become creatively involved in his surroundings in a way that is comparable to the artistic independence enjoyed by Muthesius's ideal house-dweller. In consolidating a collection of disparate objects into a single, comprehensible image, Kuno takes on the role of the artist: collating and re-presenting the world around him. Moreover, as Kuno perceives an image known and labelled by a previous civilisation of which he can have no foreknowledge, Forster's text suggests that there is something instinctual about human creativity, and that this instinct structures our experience of our surroundings, our perception of meaning and beauty. To engage creatively with the world is a fundamental aspect of our humanity; failure to foster this creativity results in a profound dehumanisation, for both Forster and Muthesius.

Kuno thus engages with history in several different ways. There is his unconscious recreation of an idea from a bygone era, as well as his palpable sense that history serves as an inspiration, a spur to his own achievement. He also engages with the history of the land onto which he emerges after leaving the Machine. Kuno knows that he is in Wessex because he has listened to a lecture on the subject (p.125). Forster's choice of Wessex is significant. It is an ancient kingdom pre-dating much of human technology, but it is also the site of one possible genesis of English national identity: Ælfrid the Great's kingdom. The architecture and technologies of the Machine have alienated Kuno from the history of the land on – or rather below – which he lives, so that his escape becomes an almost nationalistic gesture, the reclamation of a lost national identity. Moreover, Kuno understands that this reclaimed identity, this vernacular history, has its own redemptive power, that it can function as a panacea: 'Oh, I have no remedy – or, at least, only one – to tell men again and again that I have seen the hills of Wessex as Ælfrid saw them when he overthrew the Danes' (p.127).

Rose Macaulay's short and sharp assessment was typical of the initial critical response to the story: 'It has a Forster moral, but lacks charm, humour and style'.⁵³ But the text has undergone a sort of critical rehabilitation in recent decades due to its apparent prediction of late twentieth- and early twenty-first-century computer technology. As Marcia Bundy Seabury suggests, earlier scholarship, if not simply dismissive, has 'typically focussed on how it develops Forster's recurring humanist concerns about connection – of individuals with themselves, senses plus spirit, or individuals with each other and with the natural world'.⁵⁴ Critics such as Bundy Seabury and Silvana Caporaletti have moved away from humanist readings and have called it 'prophetic': a cautionary tale for an age characterised by an ever-increasing dependence on computer networks in our personal and professional lives.⁵⁵ My reading of the story implicitly argues that it is somewhat reductive to think of 'The Machine Stops' simply as an uncanny science fiction prophecy. Such a reading might easily ignore the manner in which the text's humanism chimes with contemporaneous concerns relating to the construction and use of architecture, and

⁵³ Rose Macaulay, *The Writings of E.M. Forster* (London: The Hogarth Press, 1938), p.31.

⁵⁴ Marcia Bundy Seabury, 'Images of a Networked Society: E.M. Forster's "The Machine Stops"', *Studies in Short Fiction*, vol. 34 (1997), 61-71 (p.61).

⁵⁵ Silvana Caporaletti, 'Science as Nightmare: "The Machine Stops" by E.M. Forster', *Utopian Studies*, vol. 8 (1997), 32-47. Bundy Seabury's article contains a useful index of the various critical responses to 'The Machine Stops'.

specifically to how architectural space structures and organises, even dictates, the ways in which individuals access not only the natural world, but also their own creativity and the wealth of human history. ‘The Machine Stops’ *can* feel uncannily prophetic, expressing as it does many of our twenty-first century anxieties about the technologies that mediate so much of our daily lives. But Forster’s short story is also expressive of contemporaneous fears around modern urban architecture, and the sense that, if not properly managed, these new architectural forms could have an extremely damaging impact on their occupants. Complementing these anxieties is a conviction that the proper antidote is an architecture that makes space for the natural world, and even for a less destructive, pre-modern way of life.

‘And the houses all listening’: Ford Madox Ford and Richard Aldington

I have offered, in *Tono-Bungay* and ‘The Machine Stops’, and to a lesser extent *Howards End*, texts that are greatly interested in the question of what happens when established architectural forms – and the social relations, habits and customs enshrined within them – meet new technologies. Forster and Wells are much exercised in particular by the threat to domestic space, and this interest leads them both to engage with the idea of a particular kind of rural idyll embodied in the English country house. While Wells treats this idyll satirically, Forster treats it as a valuable yet fragile ideal that is worth clinging on to, and one that it is ultimately possible to hang on to in the face of an almost overwhelming modernity. I want now to consider a few brief moments in texts by Ford Madox Ford and Richard Aldington, moments which register something of the experience of returning home from the Western Front in 1918 to find that the spaces of the battlefield have somehow altered the previously familiar street and house. These two writers also describe domestic spaces that are under threat – or, in Aldington’s case at least, domestic spaces that are reimagined as threatening – and they are interested too in the idea of an English idyll. Like Wells, Aldington approaches it with great suspicion and deals with it satirically, keen to explode what he sees as the myth of the Victorian/Edwardian idyll. Ford, meanwhile, presents a somewhat more Forsterian perspective in his bid to identify a restorative, rural, domestic architecture.

Ford was not alone in turning to the rural in the course of his post-war recovery; in the final years of the war, as well as in the years immediately following

it, the pages of *The Architectural Review* also evidenced a tendency to identify the countryside as a recuperative space. Whereas Forster and Muthesius turned to the vernacular tradition as a way to counter the, as they saw it, invasive, mechanised modernity that threatened to alienate individuals from their human natures, by the middle of the following decade the vernacular impulse had taken on a new urgency. In 1917 W.H. Cowlshaw invoked a rural idyll – the village of Thaxted in Essex – as the antithesis of the country's present wartime condition. He describes such villages as 'precious heirlooms' and 'national assets' that, by gesturing to a more peaceful and self-sufficient era, can have a restorative effect on the national consciousness.⁵⁶ Later that same year an editorial entitled 'The Housing Problem after the War' identified a specific threat to the post-war rural economy. The piece argues that 'the scarcity of farm hands will be one of the principal problems' of the post-war years, and that this scarcity will be due to a profound change in the attitudes of working-class men:

We must remember that Hodge is no longer the stay-at-home yokel whose vision was limited to a radius of six or eight miles. He will be alert in mind and body, used to mechanism, and handy with tool and pick. He will have mixed with our Oversea [sic] soldiers, as well as French and American troops. The prosperity of the Colonies, their generosity to settlers, and the allurements of freedom from the humdrum conditions prevailing here, will appeal to the British spirit of independence. [...] If we do not take steps to make labour on the farms attractive we shall be left with the old, the infirm, and the maimed just at the very moment when we want to employ the flower of our nation's manhood in its largest and most natural industry.⁵⁷

The emphasis here is on national recovery – a recovery that, the *Review* argues, must be driven by a return to the rural. There is anxiety about the machine and its capacity to do away with old ways of life and the social relations that structure them. The territories that make up the Empire also pose a threat. The assertion that agriculture is the nation's 'most natural industry' is one example of the renovation of an 'indigenous geography' that Kalliney identifies, as the colonies are registered not as a means to sustain the nation but rather as competing rural economies that might

⁵⁶ W.H. Cowlshaw, 'An Unspoiled English Village: Thaxted, Essex', *The Architectural Review*, vol. 41 (February, 1917), 25-31 (p.25).

⁵⁷ Editorial, 'The Housing Problem after the War', *The Architectural Review*, vol. 41 (April, 1917), not paginated.

tempt potential labourers away. The solution, according to the *Review*, is the provision of ‘proper houses’ for returning soldiers.⁵⁸ Britain’s recovery is dependent upon the quality of domestic architecture it will produce, as Mervyn Macartney would also argue in the *Review* in 1918. He insists that the building of decent homes for ex-servicemen and women was ‘all part and parcel of the reconstruction of social life after the War’, and that in particular ‘the solace of a rural home and quietude of green pastures’ might best alleviate ‘the stress and shock of war’.⁵⁹ It is just such a solace that Ford describes in his post-war texts, and I will turn to some relevant moments shortly. But first I want to identify some moments from the writing of both Ford and Aldington that register something of ‘the stress and shock of war’, and of how it was experienced upon returning home.

In December 1919 *The Architectural Review* published a special issue to mark the post-war ‘Peace celebrations’. Amongst the pieces included was a somewhat bellicose article by the architect Walter Godfrey, which trumpeted:

Architecture is among the first fruits of war; it is the child of victory. There is little doubt that art, the great comfort and joy of mankind, is directly engendered by suffering, and that the gift of expressing the deepest emotions and the highest ideals of the race comes only to those who have trodden the valley of the shadow of death. But whereas the other arts [...] are the outcome of personal suffering [...] the art of architecture comes as a crown to momentous national enterprises that have achieved for their peoples a full and spacious reward. The great conventions of architecture [...] were conceived by men under the stimulus of victory.⁶⁰

There is nothing of this triumphalism in Aldington’s novel *Death of a Hero* (1929), nor in the various accounts that Ford gives of his post-war years. Max Saunders identifies Ford’s novel *No Enemy* (also first published in 1929, and subtitled *A Tale of Reconstruction*) and his poem ‘A House’ (1921), as well as *Death of A Hero*, as texts which helped their authors to ‘recover from’ and ‘recuperate’ their wartime

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*

⁵⁹ Mervyn E. Macartney, “‘Homes of Rest’: Almshouses as War Memorials – II’, *The Architectural Review*, vol. 43 (June, 1918), 119-126 (pp.119-120).

⁶⁰ Walter H. Godfrey, ‘Peace and the Art of Architecture – II’, *The Architectural Review*, vol. 46 (December, 1919), 160-161 (p.161).

experiences.⁶¹ Rather than turning their attention to the – literal or metaphorical – building of a new England, as Godfrey does, moments in these texts indicate the extent to which Aldington and Ford had learned to doubt even the solidity of the streets and buildings to which they had returned.

Death of a Hero tells the story of George Winterbourne, from his birth in Victorian England to his death in the trenches. Much of the novel describes George's life in London in the years immediately prior to the outbreak of war, but George's personal fate, as well as the conflict more broadly, are present here too. They are present partly through the way in which the narrative is structured – George's wartime demise is referred to on the first page as well as in the novel's heavily ironic title, and the novel's unnamed narrator did not meet George until they were in the army together during the war – but they are also, in one particular instance, present in the fabric of the city itself.

In this episode George is walking through West London with a companion, Mr Upjohn (who is, incidentally, a cypher for Ezra Pound).⁶²

They were walking up Church Street, Kensington, that dismal communication trench which links the support line of Kensington High Street with the front line of Notting Hill Gate. How curious are cities, with their intricate trench systems and perpetual warfare, concealed but as deadly as the open warfare of armies! We live in trenches, with flat revetments of house fronts as parapets and paradoss. The warfare goes on behind the house-fronts – wives with husbands, children with parents, employers with employed, tradesmen with tradesmen, banker with lawyer, and the triumphal doctor rooting out life's casualties. [...] We walk up Church Street. Up the communication trench. We cannot see "over the top," have no vista of the immense no-man's-land of London's roofs. We cannot pierce through the house-fronts.⁶³

With the battlefields of the Western Front mapped onto the city, this is at once a pre-war and a post-war London. The passage must be understood in the context of a novel which expends a great deal of energy railing against the older generations, indicting them for the horrors of the war; Aldington is always eager to explode the

⁶¹ Max Saunders, *Self Impression: Life-Writing, Autobiographical Fiction, and the Forms of Modern Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), p.427; Max Saunders, *Ford Madox Ford: A Dual Life*, 2 vols (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), II, p.86.

⁶² Christopher Ridgway, 'Introduction', in Richard Aldington, *Death of a Hero* (London: The Hogarth Press, 1984), pp.i-xi (p.iv).

⁶³ Aldington, *Death of a Hero*, pp.117-118.

myth of a pre-war, Victorian/Edwardian idyll, especially as it pertains to the home and the family. But Aldington is also at the same time using the years prior to the war to describe a post-war experience. As the vocabulary of the Front is retrospectively brought to bear on London we see the city through the eyes of the returning combatant experiencing a once familiar environment, its spaces no longer redolent of home but of violence in a foreign field.

Reading this fragment alongside a comparable episode in Ford's writing will help to draw out this aspect in Aldington's. *It Was the Nightingale* (1933) is a fictionalised account of Ford's post-war life, and the novel begins, temporally, with 'the day of my release from service in His Britannic Majesty's army – in early 1919'.⁶⁴ He goes on later in the text to recount a moment during that same day when he had 'stood on the kerb by the Campden Hill waterworks' (p.47), just a few streets away from where Aldington's hero walked with Mr Upjohn. In the milliseconds it takes him to step from the kerb into the road, Ford's narrator realises that his relationship to London has been forever altered by his experiences on the Front:

You may say that everyone who had taken physical part in the war was then mad. No one could have come through that shattering experience and still view life and mankind with any normal vision. In those days you saw objects that the earlier mind labelled as *houses*. They had been used to seem cubic and solid permanences. But we had seen Ploegsteert where it had been revealed that men's dwellings were thin shells that could be crushed as walnuts are crushed. [...] Nay, it had been revealed to you that beneath Ordered Life itself was stretched, the merest film with, beneath it, the abysses of Chaos. One had come from the frail shelters of the Line to a world that was more frail than any canvas hut (pp.48-49).

As with the passage from *Death of a Hero*, the narrator finds that it is domestic space in particular that is altered for him. A battlefield in Belgium – at which, counterintuitively, the shelling rendered houses less permanent than the temporary military buildings from which the destruction emanated – has made it impossible to see the home, and more broadly the city, as the solid, stable entity he once felt it to be.

⁶⁴ Ford Madox Ford, *It Was the Nightingale* (London: Heinemann, 1934), p.3. Subsequent references to this edition are given in parentheses within the main body of the text.

In spite of Ford's professed love for London – 'London only! London only!' (*It Was the Nightingale*, p.64) – it was in the rural house that he went looking, both in person and imaginatively, for a way to recover from the war. Ford shared a cottage, Red Ford, with his lover Stella Bowen in the years immediately following the war, and this home was an important source for *No Enemy* and 'A House', as well as making an appearance in *It Was the Nightingale*.⁶⁵ In that text Ford describes Red Ford as 'a leaky-roofed, tile-healed, rat-ridden seventeenth-century, five-shilling a week, moribund labourer's cottage' (p.9). Although rural and a house it is far removed from Bladesover, or even from Muthesius's great English house tradition. This house is basic, nothing special, and it is precisely this simplicity that allows it to become a space of recuperation and recovery in Ford's writing.

'A House' is set out on the page as a poem in verse, but it is also a drama with different characters or voices, among them The House, The Tree, The Dog of the House, Himself and Herself (the house's occupants), and The Unborn Son of the House. Throughout, images of danger and precarity – insolvency, flooding – are set alongside images of security – of constancy and rebirth. The House, the source of this security, is the first to 'speak', and it emphasises its own simplicity: 'I am the House! / I resemble / The drawing of a child / That draws "just a house."' ⁶⁶ The house is an archetypal house, and if, as Ford suggests in *It Was the Nightingale*, the Western Front had made it impossible to look at a house without also seeing the possibility of its destruction, then 'A House' is an attempt to insist that a house can be *just a house* again. Saunders has already shown how the poem responds to the newly unstable landscape of London that Ford describes in his novel – how it 'performed the necessary post-war work of trying to reconstitute the solidity and permanence of houses'.⁶⁷ What I have hoped to do in drawing out these fragments from Aldington and Ford is to make some connections between the post-war moment and the Edwardian anxieties I have already identified. It is not that these pre-war anxieties re-emerge and are repeated in a post-war setting; the anxieties are not quite the same, although they are linked: the carnage on the Western Front being a particularly extreme example of the destruction machinery can be made to wreak on the human body. But the manner in which those anxieties are expressed – namely

⁶⁵ Saunders, *Ford Madox Ford*, pp.61-79.

⁶⁶ Ford Madox Ford, 'A House', in *Selected Poems*, ed. by Max Saunders (Manchester: Carcanet, 1997), pp.126-139 (p.126).

⁶⁷ Saunders, *Ford Madox Ford*, pp.86-90.

through a literary engagement with architectural space, and in particular with domestic space – does re-emerge, as do the proposed remedies for the crises to which they pertain. Aldington's novel, ending, as it began, with the death of its protagonist, manifestly does not look to the future; the crisis has been absolute, and fatal. In *Death of a Hero*, at least, there is no remedy. For the Wells of *Tono-Bungay* the machine is both crisis and solution, although his cynicism does seem to trump his optimism. Forster and Ford, at least, do offer up a solution to the two different moments of crisis that they describe, and it is essentially the same solution: namely the retreat to a rural idyll. It is, however, a fragile – and a very personal – solution, and one not without its own torments.⁶⁸

'A city born by fiat': Wyndham Lewis

Britain occupies an unusual place in the history of twentieth-century European architecture. Until the years following the conclusion of the Second World War, British architectural modernism was conspicuous by its absence, with only a smattering of buildings that could be called truly modernist appearing in Britain during the inter-war period. By the end of the First World War a number of important technological advances in construction methods had already taken place, but there was a concurrent squeamishness about registering something of these transformations in a building's visible form. British architects were unwilling to take a leap into the avant-garde – a phenomenon that Alan Powers has referred to as 'modernity without Modernism'.⁶⁹ In this staid architectural climate Wyndham Lewis's *The Caliph's Design: Architects! Where is your Vortex?* was a voice crying out in the wilderness. Over the course of this 'pamphlet' – first published in 1919 and stretching to just under 150 pages – Lewis mounts a typically scathing attack on the use of the visual arts in Britain at that time. The text is a satirical polemic, part fiction, part criticism, with the stated aim of highlighting the 'contradiction of what is really a very great vitality in the visual arts, and at the same time a very serious

⁶⁸ It is also a middle-class solution, offering little hope of redemption for 'Hodge', or for Leonard Bast.

⁶⁹ Powers, *Britain*, p.29.

scepticism and discouragement in the use of that vitality'.⁷⁰ For Lewis – in stark contrast to Forster and Ford – the first step along the road to collective recovery is a radical reimagining and reconstruction of the urban environment in the course of which '[t]he energy at present pent up [...] in the canvas painted in the studio [...] must be released and used in the general life of the community' (pp.11-12).

The texts which I have considered in the course of this chapter so far have tended to be laced with anxiety, along with the occasional strand of fragile optimism. Lewis's is not so much an anxious text as an angry one, and although his tone is too scornful for it to be called optimistic, his ire is at least directed at the present rather than a projected, feared future. It also differs from these texts, and indeed from all the other literary texts I consider in the course of this thesis, in that when Lewis insists upon the need to transform the city he really is calling for radical changes to the urban fabric. Consequently, Lewis's polemic does not fit neatly into either side of the binary – architectural texts as interventions, literary texts not – that I describe in my introduction. It is an attempt at an intervention, with Lewis explicitly expressing the hope that it will have a direct impact on the architectural scene. But it also reads like a text entirely free from any obligation to intervene. It is not so much that Lewis offers little in the way of practical suggestions as to how the city might be altered, although this is certainly true of *The Caliph's Design*. It is rather that, despite the challenge which Lewis lays down with his subtitle, architectural space often feels like a digression from what is the text's main theme: the present state of the visual arts. Lewis's analysis of the present state of architecture will, however, be my focus here. I undertake this reading in part to highlight how Britain was largely unaltered by architectural modernism during the inter-war years, and note that nothing like the scale of planning and rebuilding that Lewis gestures towards in this text ever really happened in Britain, and certainly not until the late 1940s and early 1950s. The reality of modernist architecture in Britain at this point in time was far more akin to Waugh's caricature in *Decline and Fall*, of which more shortly.

Despite having been an official war artist – and as the painter of *A Battery Shelled* (1919) responsible for one of the most recognisable artworks to come out of the conflict – Lewis makes almost no mention of the First World War in the course

⁷⁰ Wyndham Lewis, *The Caliph's Design: Architects! Where is your Vortex?*, ed. by Paul Edwards (Santa Barbara: Black Sparrow Press, 1986), p.9. Subsequent references to this edition are given in parentheses within the main body of the text.

of his pamphlet, as if wary of allowing the war alone to be blamed for the malaise that he identifies. When he does he simply asks, ‘Is Western Europe too uncertain of to-morrow, the collapse of religion too dislocating, Great Wars too untimely, for us to have an art that is any more than locally or individually constructive?’ (p.139). Lewis is interrogating the revolutionary potential of contemporary art, asking if it is capable of enacting change on a grand scale given the five-year catastrophe that has just overtaken the world. Although he lacks Walter Godfrey’s confidence – Godfrey predicted that the end of the Great War would result in a great revival of European architecture to rival the achievements of Ancient Greece and Rome, and that England would play a leading role in this⁷¹ – his sentiment is not dissimilar. Now,



Figure 2, Australia House, Awakening of Australia

Lewis insists in *The Caliph’s Design*, is the time for a great and revolutionary architecture in England, one that rejects a contemporary architecture content to rehash the forms of the past and instead harnesses the ‘vitality’ of the contemporary avant-garde.

Australia House, the most high-profile building to have gone up in London immediately prior to the publication of Lewis’s pamphlet, is usefully indicative of the state of architecture in Britain at the time he was writing. During the war the government had imposed an embargo on any construction not considered to be directly relevant to the

war effort. An exception was made for Australia House, although progress was hampered by what *The Architectural Review* called, somewhat euphemistically, ‘unavoidable labour troubles incident to the War’.⁷² It was built in what Nikolaus Pevsner referred to as ‘Edwardian Imperial’, the nation’s official style in the first decades of the twentieth century.⁷³ In spite of the *Review*’s insistence that ‘[t]he design is frankly modern’⁷⁴, Australia House is a composite of past styles, its

⁷¹ Godfrey, ‘Peace and the Art of Architecture – II’, p.161.

⁷² Editorial, ‘Australia House’, *The Architectural Review*, vol. 44 (September, 1918), 49-50 (p.50).

⁷³ Nikolaus Pevsner, ‘Nine Swallows – No Summer’, *The Architectural Review*, vol. 91 (May, 1942), 109-112 (p.109).

⁷⁴ ‘Australia House’, p.51.

columns borrowed from Palladianism and its mansard roof from Haussmann's Paris. With its entrance flanked by groups of statutes entitled *Peace and Prosperity* and *Awakening of Australia* (Figure 2), it was intended not simply as a site from which to administer a foreign territory, but as a statement of imperial power at a time when the British Empire was in decline. In the same vein as Godfrey's impassioned call for an architecture 'conceived [...] under the stimulus of victory', Australia House's architect, Alexander Mackenzie, was keen to build a particular vision of Britain towards the end of the First World War.

It is against this backdrop that Lewis made his demand for a new architecture. Paul Edwards reads this demand in the context of an avant-garde that was flourishing on the Continent but which had thus far failed to take root on this side of the English Channel, arguing that the text should be considered 'the ghost of an English contribution' towards the development of the International Style that would characterise so much architectural modernism in Europe and America.⁷⁵ Le Corbusier, as Andrzej Gąsiorek has suggested, is an important touchstone for Lewis's imagined city, not least because Lewis himself makes a comparison between his text and the architect's work.⁷⁶ Looking back at the writing of *The Caliph's Design* in *Rude Assignment* – first published in 1950 and subtitled *An Intellectual Autobiography* – he points to the work of Le Corbusier as the key source for his vision of a new type of urban architecture.⁷⁷ Scott Klein calls this citation 'anachronistic', as, in 1919, Le Corbusier was still Charles-Edouard Jeanneret, and yet to produce his most characteristic works.⁷⁸ Lewis was ever inventive with the past, especially his own, but this retrospective attribution of inspiration, however spurious, is useful nonetheless, helping us to locate *The Caliph's Design* within its architectural context. If this unusual text was close kin of the movement on the Continent, then it deviated considerably from the prevailing mood amongst those commissioning and building in Britain during this period.

The Caliph's Design is an extraordinary piece of writing, with 'The Parable of the Caliph's Design' as its thematic centre – a tale that Gąsiorek labels 'an

⁷⁵ Paul Edwards, 'Afterword', in *The Caliph's Design*, pp.145-160 (p.150).

⁷⁶ Gąsiorek, 'Architecture or Revolution?', pp.136-145.

⁷⁷ Wyndham Lewis, *Rude Assignment: An Intellectual Autobiography*, ed. by Toby Foshay (Santa Barbara: Black Sparrow Press, 1984), p.169.

⁷⁸ Scott W. Klein, 'Modernist Babylons: Utopian Aesthetics and Urban Spectacle in D. W. Griffith and Wyndham Lewis', *Modernist Cultures*, vol. 5 (2010), 9–29 (p.13).

originary modernist moment' and 'a fantasy of creativity *ex nihilo*'.⁷⁹ The parable is an expression of Lewis's conviction that avant-garde artistic practices – and most significantly his own practice, as well as that of his associates – can and should have a radical impact on everyday life. In the parable, the caliph presents his greatest architect and his greatest engineer with a 'little vorticist effort that I threw off while I was dressing this morning'. This 'effort' is a design for 'a typical street in a new city'. The caliph's instructions are carried out, 'And within a month a strange street transfigured the heart of that cultivated city' (pp.19-20). Lewis's language here is explicitly biblical – a *parable of transfiguration* – and the caliph's actions are suitably god-like. The design and realisation of this street are not a singular, contained incident, but rather an *inspirational* act, casting the artist as the prime mover in a new approach to building and inhabiting the city. Thus the parable is an account of a single individual's absolute authority, something that is writ large in Lewis's recollection of his state of mind at the time of writing the text in *Rude Assignment*: 'I would have had a city born by fiat, as if out of the brain of a god, or someone with a god-like power'.⁸⁰ Whereas Edwardian Imperial architecture was premised on the idea of British imperial power, Lewis's proposed city is premised on the power of the artist.

Lewis envisions the revolutionary artist altering not only the *appearance* of the city, but the very *life* of the city, and it is this life that is at stake in architecture. It is this relationship – between artist and public, maker and spectator – that is played out in Lewis's city. From his privileged, powerful position, the visionary artist can reinvigorate a dulled population. A large-scale reorganisation of the built environment is the necessary first step in such a process, because urban space *acts upon* its occupants. Lewis is especially concerned with the impression that London makes upon the ordinary city-dweller, stating, 'I should like to see the entire city rebuilt on a more conscious pattern' (p.33). He is convinced of the potency, and the potential, of the urban landscape:

Whether in the weight of a Rhetoric [sic] of buildings, or in the subtler ways of beauty signifying the delights and rewards of success won by toil and adventure; in a thousand ways the

⁷⁹ Andrzej Gąsiorek, *Wyndham Lewis and Modernism* (Tavistock: Northcote House, 2004), pp.48-9.

⁸⁰ Lewis, *Rude Assignment*, p.169.

imagination of the multitude could be captured and fixed (pp.28-30).

This is a utopian vision with a sinister slant, offering ‘delights’, ‘rewards’, ‘imagination’, but achieving all this through the *capturing* and *fixing* of the population’s minds. Most crucially, Lewis’s vision is enacted through the architecture and other forms of urban design, through their ‘Rhetoric’. The built environment has the agency of a speaker, and one that speaks with authority; it communicates meaning, it *instructs*.

In all this Lewis exhibits apparently contradictory feelings towards the population that would inhabit the spaces which he envisions. He suggests that the fulfilment of his project would lead to great improvements in the lives of the city’s ordinary inhabitants through the creation of a truly invigorating urban environment, and that it is this, rather than his own gratification as an artist, that is the desired end:

[W]hen I say that I should like to see a completely transfigured world, it is not because I want to *look* at it. It is *you* who would look at it. It would be your spirit that would benefit by this exhilarating spectacle (p.39).

Yet, in emphasising the necessity of his vision, he also shows very little regard for those inhabitants, suggesting that ‘The life of the crowd, of the common or garden man, is exterior. He can only live through others, outside himself. He, in a sense, *is* the houses, the railings, the bunting or absence of bunting’ (p.30) [emphasis in the original]. Architecture, Lewis insists, must be made to radically reorder the city, and he intended that his text should have a practical part to play in bringing that about. He writes, ‘There is no reason at all why there should not be a certain number of interesting architects. I can also see no reason why this pamphlet should not bring them forth’ (p.33). The text is intended as inspiration – a provocation to artists and architects analogous to the caliph’s ‘vorticist effort’. But he characteristically shows little desire to alter the social relations contained within and reproduced by the city.

In *Rude Assignment* Lewis reiterates the revolutionary call of *The Caliph’s Design*, stating, ‘had I possessed the power I should certainly have torn down the whole of London’. He goes on to suggest what his creation might have looked like, something that he omits entirely from the original text. Lewis describes ‘hanging gardens between Blackfriars Bridge and Westminster’, ‘snow-white palaces’, and a

brand new Houses of Parliament in which ‘Old Ben might have his being, out of sentiment, in a wire-less tower of aluminium girders rising at the extremity of the building’.⁸¹ *The Caliph’s Design* is intensely critical of the state of contemporaneous architecture, heaping scorn on the predominant fondness for building that rehashes old architectural styles to create those ‘silly antique fakes’, the result of architects having their ‘sweet and horrible way’ (p.11). Lewis is vociferous in his rejection of artistic expression that is imitative and merely conforms to established style and taste: ‘Fashion is of the nature of an aperient. It is a patent stimulus of use only to the constipated and the sluggish’ (p.79). The avant-garde impulse behind Lewis’s text leads him to insist that architecture which mines the past is hopelessly defunct, an artistic dead-end, because ‘we want *one* mode, for there *is* only one mode for any one time, and all the other modes are for other times’ (p.96) [emphasis in the original]. This drive to locate an artistic mode authentically of its time – that would be, in the words of *Blast*, ‘organic with its Time’ – is at the very centre of Lewis’s Vorticism, and he also insists that such a mode be authentically *of its place*: ‘We want to make in England not a popular art, not a revival of lost folk art, or a romantic fostering of such unactual conditions’.⁸² Art must be responsive to the situation in which it is produced, so that for art to be truly vital in England it must be an English art. Thus Lewis rails against the inauthentic in art, rejecting the contrived, the false, the ‘sham’, the borrowed, the *alien*. This is a similarly strong theme in *The English House*. Muthesius passionately rejects Palladianism, for example, on the grounds of inauthenticity, writing of Inigo Jones’s work, in a phrase that is surprisingly reminiscent of Lewis and his co-agitators in *Blast*, that it ‘has nothing to do with the continuing development of the house as a living organism’ (p.55). Muthesius feels keenly that architecture should be authentically *of* that place in which it is built, and insists that the country requires ‘a new architecture that disregards the now conventional idioms of past cultures fundamentally different from our own’ (p.126). (If Muthesius is aware of the irony of a foreign visitor making such a statement then he makes no mention of it.) Furthermore, in a reversal of Lewis’s claims, inauthenticity is also the backbone of Muthesius’s gripe with ‘all the fantastic

⁸¹ Lewis, *Rude Assignment*, p.169.

⁸² Wyndham Lewis (ed.), ‘Long Live the Vortex’, *Blast 1* (London: Thames and Hudson, 2009), pp.7-8 (p.8); ‘Manifesto’, *Blast 1*, pp.30-43 (p.34). Originally published as *Blast*, No. 1, June 20th, 1914, and subtitled *Review of the Great English Vortex*.

excesses of a so-called modern style' (p.xxvii). While he does not actually single out any particular figures for condemnation, it is easy to see him disliking Perret's concrete constructions, and his championing of the English house is a conscious rejection of 'sham modernity' and 'whimsical artificiality' (p.xxvii). In employing the same logic as Lewis, Muthesius comes to the opposite conclusion, and these are not the only points in their respective discussions of authenticity that the two share some surprising common ground. Both authors celebrate the career of W.R. Lethaby, and each sees in it something that is exemplary of that which he is himself championing. Muthesius writes of Lethaby that 'those who know his houses must immediately recognise that he is one of the architects who today uphold and continue the best traditions of English house-building' (p.151). Meanwhile Lewis points to Lethaby's *Architecture: An Introduction to the History and Theory of the Art of Building* as the 'best treatise' on architecture: 'It appears to me to be as sound a book as possible: and if everybody were of Mr. Lethaby's opinions we should soon find that the aspect of this lifeless scene had changed for the better'. Lewis goes on to quote an edited chunk from Lethaby's text, including:

The modern way of building must be flexible and vigorous, even smart and hard. We must give up designing the broken-down picturesque which is part of the ideal of make-believe. The enemy is not science, but vulgarity, a pretence to beauty at second hand (p.45).

This is Lethaby at his most Lewis-like, and his words blend seamlessly into *The Caliph's Design*.

This anxiety about authenticity – the insistence that architecture be suited to the English, or British, condition, and that it respond to the needs and spirit of its day – was shared not only by Muthesius and Lewis, but by many others within the architectural community, both critics and practitioners.⁸³ Although the two texts – and Forster's also – deal with the question of authenticity in relation to the building and experience of architectural space in some starkly different ways, there is nonetheless significant common ground: the prioritisation of 'human sensations and

⁸³ See, for example, the following articles from *The Architectural Review*: Cowlishaw, *Op. Cit.*; G.J.H., 'Recent English Domestic Architecture', *The Architectural Review*, vol. 41 (March, 1917), 55-61; Editorial, 'British Columbia House, Regent Street, London', *The Architectural Review*, vol. 43 (February, 1918), 33-35 (p.33); W.R. Lethaby, 'The Spirit of Rome and Our Modern Problem in Architecture', *The Architectural Review*, vol. 41 (January, 1917), 1-7.

responses' in relation to architectural space which, Powers suggests, is a key component of Britain's relationship with architecture during the twentieth century.⁸⁴ It is a concern that is writ particularly large in *The English House*. Muthesius argues that the vernacular is crucial to architecture's proper function, as it facilitates the accessing of a natural yet dormant artistic impulse for the house-dwellers through fostering an active, creative relationship with their surroundings. A 'sham' architecture would block this access: the imposition of an inauthentic other that prevents the proper establishment of a triangular relationship between the house, its occupants and the land. Forster too proposes such priorities in 'The Machine Stops'. Kuno's epiphany is not so much that a surface world exists beyond the Machine, but that sensation alone is the root of all authentic human experience. Meanwhile Lewis's conviction that 'there is only one mode for any one time' is an expression of his modernist credo that art must be *vital*: it must not simply engage with modern life, but truly and tangibly involve itself in it. Indeed it is this coupling of the rejection of surface appearance (concerned with style, fad and fashion) and an embracing of the sensorial that, the Vorticists suggest, truly sets them apart from their predecessors and contemporaries:

We do not want to change the appearance of the world, because we are not Naturalists, Impressionists or Futurists (the latest form of Impressionism), and do not depend on the appearance of the world for our art. / WE ONLY WANT THE WORLD TO LIVE, and to feel its crude energy flowing through us.⁸⁵

Vorticist art *is* sensation.

Yet for all his prioritising of the human body in urban space, Lewis's vision is far removed from Forster's humanism. Lewis desires that the city create a 'Rhetoric of buildings', with the aim of 'capturing' and 'fixing' the population, and it is his conviction that such a process can only come about through the intervention of the absolutist caliph-artist. His city calls for an architecture that comes dangerously close to rendering the subjectivity of its population obsolete. Sensorial experience – and its capacity to radically alter the lives of city-dwellers – is at the centre of Lewis's vision, but experience is here always mediated by architectural

⁸⁴ Powers, *Britain*, p.11.

⁸⁵ 'Long Live the Vortex', p.7.

space, and, through that architecture, by the singular figure of the artist. Andrzej Gąsiorek suggests that *The Caliph's Design* enacts a 'major divide within modernist thinking about the city' – namely the divide between, on the one hand, literary modernism's characteristic emphasis on subjective experience, and, on the other, a tendency amongst modernist architects towards totalising schemes, exemplified in the (nearly always un-built) urban planning of a figure like Le Corbusier. Gąsiorek argues that Lewis's particular vision does in fact make space for subjective experiences of the city and, moreover, posits this as an aim which is at the core of the text: 'Its insistence on order, design and beauty in the city derives from a prior conviction that people escape entrapment in animality or mechanism through the *techne* of civilisation, which require autonomous thought and independent creativity'. Thus Lewis's plan is an expression of 'the view that humans should actively create the meanings and values by which they live and not be subjugated by ideologies of which they may scarcely be aware', and in the text itself Lewis registers some concern that 'the process of social rationalisation may have dystopian consequences'.⁸⁶ In this Gąsiorek points to a specific passage from *The Caliph's Design* in which Lewis refers to 'a desire to perfect and continue to create; to order, regulate, disinfect and stabilise our life', but then tempers this, stating that such a process might lead humanity to 'become overpowered by our creation, and become as mechanical as a tremendous insect world, all our awakened reason entirely disappeared' (pp.74-76).

Lewis does indeed stress, as Gąsiorek's argument suggests, that his spectacular city would be for the benefit of the average city-dweller first and foremost. But the text of *The Caliph's Design* does not propose this spectacle as a source of autonomy and independence for the city's occupants. The public only have the most to gain because they have the furthest to come; as an artist Lewis does not require such a spectacle to invigorate him. Lewis consistently relegates the ordinary person to a position of secondary importance behind the artist, because it is the artist alone that can supply the vitality so sorely lacking in the lives of the populace. They are figured as merely empty vessels, capable only of an 'exterior' existence. Thus, according to Lewis, the population is in a very literal sense produced by the urban environment which it inhabits: a mass of barely distinguishable individuals,

⁸⁶ Gąsiorek, 'Architecture or Revolution?', pp.138-139.

dependent upon another – the artist – for their very capacity to feel alive. The only subjectivity exercised in this urban space is the artist's. His warning of 'a tremendous insect world' seems a very slight mitigation for a text that so forcefully and clearly sets out such a hierarchy of power and control. The very wording of this warning, too, suggests not so much inherent revulsion at the idea of autocratic rule, but rather a belief that it would be ineffective. Lewis states that a dictatorial society would do away with 'all our awakened reason', that is, all the reason that has been awakened by the Lewisian spectacle. His concern arises not so much out of respect for the life of the population, but instead out of a zealous belief in his own project.

If *The Caliph's Design* is interested in transposing vital art from the canvas to the street then Lewis's article 'Plain Home-BUILDER: Where is your Vorticist?' – first published in the November 1934 edition of *The Architectural Review* – moves indoors, turning its attention to the interior of the home. In so doing it places great emphasis on the embodied city-dweller, but this time to the point where the objectifying, totalising planning impulse is abandoned. Gąsiorek neatly encapsulates the impersonal nature of this impulse:

The regulative ideal at work in many modernist visions of ideal cities or buildings is one in which the imposition of order is the overriding aim, while the everyday is seen as the source of a disorder that must be tidied up and perhaps even expunged. This disorder is also attributed to history itself, the site of all previous failures to bring about a desired social harmony.⁸⁷

In their analyses of *The Caliph's Design* both Gąsiorek and David Ashford point to 'Plain Home-BUILDER' as an important supplementary text to the earlier pamphlet, and in so doing argue that everyday practices occupy a significant place in Lewis's urban vision too. In this essay Lewis firmly reiterates and emphasises his concern with the excesses of social control, and Ashford suggests that the piece is an anti-authoritarian project, constituting a rejection of 'the centralising impulse behind *The Caliph's Design*'.⁸⁸ Indeed, Lewis's essay does more than simply refute the claims of his earlier text: it *undoes* the work of *The Caliph's Design*. Toby Foshay has argued that in writing *Rude Assignment* Lewis was 'exercised by either a personal or

⁸⁷Gąsiorek, 'Architecture or Revolution?', p.142.

⁸⁸ David Ashford, 'Blueprints for Babylon: Modernist Mapping of the London Underground 1913-1939', *Modernism/modernity*, vol. 14 (2010), 735-764 (p.759).

a public censorship', using the later text to soften the blow of some of his more controversial pronouncements that had attracted the ire of his peers.⁸⁹ One senses that 'Plain Home-Builder', with its dilution of Lewis's bold, difficult, singular vision, might be similarly revisionist.

However, although by stepping inside the domestic spaces of his imagined city Lewis cannot mitigate the harshness of his original text, this gesture does generate some surprising connections between the Vorticist city and the humanism of Forster and Muthesius. More than slightly reminiscent of some passages in *The English House*, Lewis sets out to make art intelligible to the plain home-builder of the title; that is, the ordinary individual faced with the task of interior decoration.⁹⁰ (Consequently this text does read like a genuine intervention, but it looks to address the question of how the city, and more specifically the home, should be used, rather than the question of how the city should be built.) Lewis calls for this individual to become spontaneously involved in artistic activity, and to do so largely free from external influence and without fear of doing it wrong, while he simultaneously rails against the modernist aversion to clutter: 'You must not take these spotless polar models of the "ideal" too seriously. [...] [I]t is up to you to make them habitable – even disorderly. [...] You should not be afraid of *desecrating* these spotless and puritanic planes and prudish cubes'.⁹¹ (Although, of course, this exhortation, by its very nature, belies the fact that Lewis does not think plain home-builders capable of achieving their artistic independence all on their own.) Thus, it is posited by Ashford and Gąsiorek, 'Plain Home-Builder' anticipates subsequent projects that identified revolutionary potential in the everyday use of the city, namely the Situationiste Internationale and other thinkers associated with the group (both point in particular to the work of Certeau).⁹² These are projects that sought to make the human body – its whims, experiences, sensations – of primary importance in our consideration of the urban environment, and to understand that there exists a truly dynamic relationship between architectural space and its occupants. 'Plain Home-Builder' democratises creativity, and finds a place for subjectivity in the modernist cityscape, but it can only do this by reacting against that modernism and encouraging the

⁸⁹ Toby Foshay, 'Editor's Note', *Rude Assignment*, not paginated.

⁹⁰ Wyndham Lewis, 'Plain Home-Builder: Where is your Vorticist?', in *Wyndham Lewis on Art: Collected Writings 1913-1956*, ed. by Walter Michel and C.J. Fox (London: Thames and Hudson, 1969), pp.276-285 (p.277).

⁹¹ *Ibid.*, p.285.

⁹² Gąsiorek, 'Architecture or Revolution?', p.145; Ashford, 'Blueprints for Babylon', pp.759-760.

desecration of modernist spaces. Thus the article constitutes a radical reassessment of the manifesto laid down in *The Caliph's Design*.

What Lewis's two texts do share is a dissatisfaction with the circumstances of the present moment, and the conviction that novelty, be it in the form of a new architecture or of new uses of existing architecture, is a solution rather than a threat. Lewis rejects the status quo and conjures the future not as a dangerous proposition – as it is, for example, in texts by Wells and Forster – but as a potential remedy for present ills. It is this conviction that marks Lewis's modernist vision out from what had come before, but also, as I will suggest in the following pages, from what came after.

'Something Clean and Square': Evelyn Waugh

Historian William Whyte writes,

The year 1927 is a big one in the history of English modernism. The first English translation of Le Corbusier's *Vers une Architecture* appeared. Peter Behrens's *New Ways*, in Northampton—acknowledged at the time as the first great statement of English modernist design—was unveiled to the public. And also, perhaps even more memorably, Evelyn Waugh wrote *Decline and Fall* and in the process immortalized the nascent modern movement.⁹³

Whyte's '1927' is illustrative of some of the significant qualities of British modernism: it occurred considerably later than its Continental equivalents; when it finally did occur its development was prompted by the work of foreign émigrés; it often received a less than enthusiastic reception from the public, as evidenced by Waugh's satirical swipes in *Decline and Fall* (published in 1928).⁹⁴ And the novel was by no means Waugh's last word on the subject. He begins 'A Call to Orders' – an article originally published in 1938 in a supplement to *Country Life* – with a celebration of 'the monuments of our Augustan age of architecture' that are 'profusely [...] strewn over England'. He invokes a broad range of architectural styles of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, from Muthesius-approved

⁹³ William Whyte, 'The Englishness of English Architecture: Modernism and the Making of a National International Style, 1927-1957', *Journal of British Studies*, vol. 48 (2009), 441-465 (p.442).

⁹⁴ For more on the British reception of the Modern Movement see Powers, *Britain*, pp.22-29.

vernacular buildings ‘grouped as a rule round the market place or the church’, to ‘the great palaces of the Whig oligarchs, with their lakes and bridges and Grand Avenues, orangeries and follies, their immense facades and towering porticos, their colonnades and pavilions and terraces’, and offers a humorous vision of middle England: ‘A lovely house where an aged colonel plays wireless music to an obese retriever’.⁹⁵ In this survey Waugh refers to the prevalent architectural style in Britain prior to the outbreak of the Second World War – Neo-Georgian – and suggests that it might be taken as a remedy against modernism:

They are all over England, these models of civilised buildings, and of late years we have been turning to them again in our convalescence from the post-war Corbusier plague that has passed over us, leaving the face of England scarred and pitted, but still recognisable.

Architectural modernism is figured as a dangerous foreign malady – a sentiment shared by many in Britain at the time.⁹⁶ The Spanish flu pandemic of 1918 (Europe’s literal post-war plague) would certainly have lent great potency to Waugh’s metaphor, and it is one that he extends: ‘In England we have an artistic constitution which can still put up a good fight; our own manifold diseases render us impervious to many microbes which work havoc upon the sounder but slighter races’. But Waugh, though satirical, is also hopeful, suggesting that the nation’s ‘recovery’ is evidenced by a return to ‘stone and brick and timber that will mellow and richen with age’, to ‘the school in which our fathers excelled’.⁹⁷ The country has a wealth of architectural heritage on which to draw in its rejection of modernism. Thus the article not only rejects architectural modernism as an unwanted import, but anoints the author’s desired alternative: a return to the proper order of things, to vernacular materials and methods.

The modernist ‘plague’ to which Waugh refers did indeed have a relatively small impact on Britain during the inter-war years. *The Caliph’s Design* exemplifies some of architectural modernism’s most vilified characteristics as perceived by its critics; this modernism is controlling, totalising, impersonal, inorganic. But it also

⁹⁵ Evelyn Waugh, ‘A Call to Orders’, *The Essays, Articles and Reviews of Evelyn Waugh*, ed. by Donat Gallagher (London: Methuen, 1983), pp.215-218 (p.215).

⁹⁶ See note 83 above.

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, p.216.

bears little relation to the modernism that actually found its way to Britain in the ensuing years. Modernist architectural projects were often the result of commissions for the building of private homes. Behrens's New Ways is an important example, as are High and Over by Amyas Connell (1929-31) and Serge Chermayeff's house Bentley Wood in Sussex (1935-8). When modernist architecture did find its way into town and city via commissions for public buildings – the De La Warr Pavilion at Bexhill on Sea by Erich Mendelsohn and Chermayeff (1935) or the Finsbury Health Centre by Berthold Lubetkin with Tecton (1935-38) – it was the exception rather than the rule. In Waugh's novel we find another instance – in common with Wells, Forster, and even Lewis – of the use of domestic space as a means to address a wider issue, in this case the early emergence of an architectural modernism in Britain. Once again the house becomes a contested site, pulled in different directions by competing forces, and, in the context of a modernism whose first foothold in Britain was the private house, this is particularly apt.

In 'A Call to Orders' Waugh uses Le Corbusier to stand for the Modern Movement more broadly, and he performs the same move in *Decline and Fall*. Professor Otto Silenus, whose brand new King's Thursday is a 'surprising creation of ferro-concrete and aluminium', has a name that calls to mind Walter Gropius, but the character is generally more evocative of Le Corbusier. His assertion that '[t]he only perfect building must be the factory, because that is built to house machines, not men' parodies Le Corbusier's most famous pronouncement: 'The house is a machine for living in'.⁹⁸ Furthermore, Waugh's own illustration of the character is a caricature of the real-life architect, complete with his trademark round-framed glasses and bow tie (p.112). Silenus is a ridiculous figure, taking the modernist dogma to extremes never reached by Le Corbusier and his fellows. When a journalist calls to report on the new building Silenus tells him that 'The problem of architecture as I see it [...] is the problem of all art – the elimination of the human element from the consideration of form', and that 'All ill comes from man' (p.111). This is an architecture that is not merely inhumane, but totally inhuman, a building from which users are ideally absent. Moreover, Silenus is identified, and indeed identifies himself, more closely with a machine than with other people. He is unable to understand even the most basic of human impulses, asking, 'Why can't the creatures

⁹⁸ Evelyn Waugh, *Decline and Fall* (London: Penguin, 2001), pp.111. Subsequent references to this edition are given in parentheses within the main body of the text.

stay in one place? [...] Why can't they sit still and work?' (p.111) Nor is he subject to ordinary human affection or attraction, saying only that Margot, who attracts the sexual attentions of a number of men in the novel, 'conforms to type' (p.118). At the height of Waugh's mockery one of the architect's workmen finds that Silenus has been stalled in the same attitude for two hours: 'his fawn-like eyes were fixed and inexpressive, and the hand which had held the biscuit still rose and fell to and from his mouth with a regular motion, while his empty jaws champed rhythmically' (p.113). These are the mere mechanics of a life. Silenus is a pointless machine, still running long after the initial human impulse – hunger – has abated.

A similarly mechanistic, unthinking Le Corbusier emerges in two other texts from 1928. In a review of the recently published *Towards a New Architecture* (the English language version of *Vers Une Architecture* that Whyte refers to) Edwin Lutyens, house architect of the British Empire, dismissed Le Corbusier's 'machine for living in' as 'mass-made cages suitable for machine-made man'.⁹⁹ Meanwhile, in an introductory editorial to *The Architectural Review*'s special issue on the English house and modernism, the authors, paraphrasing Le Corbusier, note his insistence that 'a new age introduces new materials which demand to be used, and demand to be used in a new shape', as well as one of this statement's logical conclusions: 'the house should discover a new shape'. They then go on to find fault with this approach:

If Design is to break with shibboleths many age-old prejudices and predilections must go; but if in disentangling Design from the past we substitute for traditionalism an equally conventional modernism, we are merely exchanging one prejudice for another.

In putting the cart of material before the horse of plan, however intentionally, Le Corbusier is helping to spread a grand half-truth, the acceptance of which would give an orientation to the modern movement as false and fatal as the fallacies of Ruskin in the romantic.¹⁰⁰

The authors decry modernism as a programmatic approach to building that, in its ideological insistence upon the finding of new forms to match new materials, runs

⁹⁹ Edwin Lutyens, 'The Robotism of Architecture', in Irena Murray and Julian Osley (eds.), *Le Corbusier and Britain: An Anthology* (Oxford: Routledge, 2009), pp.35-38 (p.38). Originally published in *The Observer*, 29 January, 1928.

¹⁰⁰ Editorial, 'Europe Discusses the House', *The Architectural Review*, vol. 64 (December, 1928), 221-222.

the risk of neglecting the requirements of a building's function, and therefore ultimately the needs of its occupants. Silenus is the embodiment of such an approach to building, taken to a comic extreme.

Waugh's attack on architectural modernism in *Decline and Fall* is concerned as much with the movement's *tone* as with its style, and in particular with what he perceives to be modernism's sense of its own significance and value. During the course of his stay at King's Thursday Paul has trouble sleeping, as the house itself triggers a sort of nervous energy in him. He finds 'his thoughts racing uncontrollably' and feels 'the sleepless, involved genius of the house heavy about his head', imagining that its occupants are 'just insignificant incidents in the life of the house: this new-born monster to whose birth endless ages and forgotten cultures had been in travail' (p.127). Waugh's narration ridicules the idea that the house is the result of some great progress in architecture, building upon achievements that have come before it, just as he mocks the notion that the house is an inspired creation, a work of 'genius'. The house's 'sleepless involved genius' echoes the 'genius' of its creator Silenus: an insomniac who 'was a "find" of Mrs Beste-Chetwynde's. He was not yet very famous anywhere, though all who met him carried away deep and diverse impressions of his genius' (pp.110&119). The attribute of 'genius' has been bestowed on the architect by an undiscerning, fashionable set typified by Margot Beste-Chetwynde, and it is, Waugh suggests, as spurious as his chosen title of 'Professor'. In truth Silenus is an eccentric failure, 'starving resignedly in a bedsitting-room in Bloomsbury', rather than a restless, tormented genius, his only commission having been a set for a feature film that was a commercial flop (pp.110-111). The status of Silenus's modernist creation is the result of fashion, and not attainment.

David Bradshaw suggests that Waugh uses Silenus to satirise those within British society who embraced the trappings of modernism as a kind of fashion statement – a 'trendy dogma'.¹⁰¹ In *Decline and Fall* it is the *nouveau riche* who flock to modernism, and Waugh makes an understated, but also quite viciously anti-Semitic, attack on these owners of 'modernised manors'. As visitors to the old King's Thursday – that is, the building as it was prior to Silenus's rebuild – they used to derive their pleasure during the visit from the opportunity to appropriate for

¹⁰¹ David Bradshaw, 'Introduction', in *Decline and Fall*, pp.ix-xxxiv (p.xxvii).

themselves the literally noble history of their hosts, which allowed them to ‘step for an hour and a half out of their own century into the leisurely, prosaic life of the English renaissance’. Waugh suggests that their interest in architecture is merely a longing for status, and that just as they inhabit modern homes that are expressions of their newfound, commercially won wealth, so they like to visit old ones in order to imagine a more prestigious existence for their ancestors, who merely ‘slept on straw or among the aromatic merchandise of some Hanse ghetto’ (p.108).

George McCartney finds similar critiques of society’s fashionable sets elsewhere in *Decline and Fall*, and, indeed, across Waugh’s fiction. McCartney suggests that the root cause of these attacks is Waugh’s own difficult relationship with both the century he lived in and the one that immediately preceded it, being never quite ‘comfortable’ in the former but with ‘little love for the nineteenth’: ‘In novel after novel, he ridicules those of his characters who try to go on living as though the Great War had never happened, as though the achievement of true happiness were only a matter of perpetuating the attitudes and values of the previous age’. McCartney points in particular to descriptions of Llanabba Castle itself as being indicative of Waugh’s disdain for those who would hold up the nineteenth century as some sort of ideal.¹⁰² The house – ‘castle’ is an overstatement – is part folly, its main body being ‘very much like any other large country house’, while its façade is ‘a model of medieval impregnability’ – all the result of work carried out at very little expense by the owners towards the end of the nineteenth century (p.20). McCartney suggests that, ‘It was just this sort of blend of pragmatism and sentimentality for which the nineteenth century stood indicted in Waugh’s mind. It was guilty of exploiting a cultural past for its purely decorative value’.¹⁰³

Waugh satirises both the pro-modernist sentiments of the *nouveau riche* and the backward looking sentimentality of enthusiasts for nineteenth-century humanism through the characters of Margot Beste-Chetwynde and Paul Pennyfeather respectively. Silenus rebuilds King’s Thursday in response to Margot’s succinct request for ‘[s]omething clean and square’, her only other stipulation being: ‘Please see that it is finished by the spring’. Her request is a conduit for Waugh’s satire, as it takes Silenus three days to mull over ‘the aesthetic implications of these instructions’

¹⁰² George McCartney, *Confused Roaring: Evelyn Waugh and the Modernist Tradition* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1987), p.4.

¹⁰³ *Ibid.*, p.4.

(pp.110-111). Once again the architect is an object of fun, agonising over a flippant request from a hopelessly unengaged client whose only concern is to have a house built in the latest fashion. But it is with Paul's arrival at the house that Waugh's critique of the architecture begins apace. Approaching the house – not yet in view – driven by Margot's chauffeur, Paul takes pleasure in his rural surroundings, in the trees and in 'the distant radiance of a lake'. This puts him in contemplative mood:

Surely, he thought, these great chestnuts in the morning sun stood for something enduring and serene in a world that had lost its reason and would so stand when the chaos and confusion were forgotten? And surely it was the spirit of William Morris that whispered to him in Margot Beste-Chetwynde's motor car about seed-time and harvest, the superb succession of the seasons, the harmonious interdependence of rich and poor, of dignity, innocence and tradition? But at a turn in the drive the cadence of his thoughts was abruptly transected. They had come into sight of the house (p.116).

Paul finds something fundamental in the landscape that surrounds the house, something remedial and redemptive that it has to offer a world damaged by the 'chaos and confusion' of the First World War. Such an observation very much taps into the same vein as the humanism of Muthesius and Forster, and indeed of the Arts and Crafts movement. The natural world, English national identity, and artistic expression exist in mutually supportive relation with one another and will, if properly nourished, restore the nation to its health. Yet Paul, in common with every other character in the novel, cannot escape Waugh's mockery. His fondness for falling back on the comforts of the English rural idyll – something he does in exemplary fashion in this passage – is, comparatively gently, made fun of by the narrator. When Paul feels 'the spirit of William Morris' communicating with him his appropriation of the Morrisian ideal is partial. Paul omits Morris's radicalism from his vision, whether wilfully, out of idealism, or out of ignorance: as a socialist Morris would not have identified an innate and beneficial contract between rich and poor, but rather would have observed inequality and the necessity for change. Paul is cast as a philistine not entirely unlike the owners of 'modernised manors', employing historical and cultural points of reference without understanding or, perhaps worse, while ignoring their relevance. Similarly, in a later passage narrated from Paul's point of view we are told that 'Mrs Beste-Chetwynde reappeared from her little bout

of veronal, fresh and exquisite as a seventeenth-century lyric. The meadow of green glass seemed to burst into flower under her feet as she passed from the lift to the cocktail table' (p.124). Paul's image of Margot is a romantic, pastoral one, consistent with his naively adoring imagination, certainly, but a rather unsuitable mode in which to describe a manipulative social climber and manager of brothels, particularly one who has just awoken from a heavy, drug-induced sleep and is already making her way towards more intoxicants.

Waugh mocks too the modernist prioritisation of efficiency in his description of the house. Both '[t]he aluminium lift shot up' and '[t]he aluminium blinds shot up' appear within the space of a few paragraphs, Waugh's monotonous description enacting the monotony of the house's mechanised processes. The new King's Thursday 'doesn't seem to be a great success with the county' either; Lady Vanbrugh is the only guest to offer her praises, and even then it is on the unseen facilities alone that she gives Silenus backhanded congratulations: 'She said she understood that the drains were satisfactory, but that, of course, they were underground' (p.117). Even given the technological achievements of the house – which Waugh prizes at little – Silenus has failed to achieve the aesthetic purity implied by Margot's original instructions. The building consists of 'labyrinthine corridors' (p.124). It is complex and cluttered, with a gaudy interior featuring an entrance hall with 'a floor of bottle-green glass' (p.116). The interior design is bizarre, with 'pneumatic rubber furniture' appearing alongside a 'porcelain ceiling' and 'leather-hung walls' (p.129). Elsewhere in the house the study has a 'luminous ceiling', the conservatory contains 'indiarubber fungi' and the drawing-room floor is 'a large kaleidoscope, set in motion by an electric button' (p.131). Meanwhile the exterior is anything but clean and square, dominated as it is by a 'great pyramidal tower' and 'roofs and domes of glass and aluminium which glittered like Chanel diamonds in the afternoon sun' (p.131). The house – a failure, even on its own terms – is really no less a 'sham' product of fashionable tastes than Llanabba Castle. Modernism is at best pretence, and at worst a dangerous intrusion.

It is McCartney's contention that Waugh finds a certain honesty in modernism that is entirely lacking in the 'sham' culture of the nineteenth century. It might be mechanised, harsh, even inhuman and inhumane, but modernism is fit for the *purpose of the age*. So, even though its exponents are dehumanised and its followers demonstrate merely a vacuous interest in following the next big thing,

modernism itself, so McCartney argues, is exempt from Waugh's criticisms, due to its expression of 'a certain perverse integrity' and a willingness to confront 'the sour truth of the twentieth century's streamlined transience'.¹⁰⁴ *Decline and Fall* certainly shares with *The Caliph's Design* a concern with integrity, or perhaps, more accurately, authenticity. Both Lewis and Waugh find fault with 'sham' art, with artistic expression that is imitative, that merely conforms to established style and taste. This rejection of the 'sham' is an important facet of Lewis's modernism, of the drive towards one mode for one time; to adopt another mode is to fail to take into account the realities of twentieth-century modernity, and is thus inauthentic. Waugh, McCartney argues, is sympathetic to this modernist attack on the 'sham', attacking those inauthentic sentiments expressed through Paul in the 'modernist critique of [...] nineteenth-century humanism' supplied by Silenus.¹⁰⁵ Yet although Paul and his dreamy brand of nineteenth-century humanism are not left untouched by Waugh's satire, it is a struggle to detect a real celebration of modernism as a viable and vital alternative in the novel. Paul first experiences the new house as a violent and disruptive invasion; his mental processes are 'abruptly transected'. The architecture is an alien intrusion that interrupts his understanding of his relation to the world around him, just at that crucial moment when he is beginning to draw solace and refreshment from his surroundings. Silenus is the novel's figurehead for the Modern Movement, but he is simply too ridiculous a figure to stand for a genuinely vital and authentic approach to building. With his literally foreign origins he has constructed what Waugh considers to be a foreign, shallow, sham novelty.

Both *Tono-Bungay* and *Decline and Fall*, then, present the building of a modern(ist) private home as a kind of folly. The buildings' construction – and in the case of King's Thursday, completion – are shortly followed by a character's downfall, the result in both instances of a morally dubious business venture: Edward is ruined financially when his expedition to steal large quantities of the mineral 'quap' is a failure, and Paul goes to prison when he is caught running business errands for Margot, a brothel owner. For Wells, such folly – encapsulated in both the building of Crest Hill and the expedition – is an indictment of industrialised capitalism. For Waugh, meanwhile, King's Thursday is an indictment of Margot's *nouvelle riche* pretensions, and of a foreign architecture.

¹⁰⁴ McCartney, *Confused Roaring*, p.6.

¹⁰⁵ McCartney, *Confused Roaring*, pp.4-6.

All of these texts mark a moment of transition. In some instances the change or shift that is registered is a threatening force or a devastating event, while in others it is something that is desperately needed; these latter texts fear stasis as much as they fear change. In all of the texts, too, the home – be it in the form of the grand country house, the ordinary urban terrace, the rural cottage, or one tiny cell in an imagined city – is the site at which change is registered most profoundly. For Ford, Lewis and the Forster of *Howards End*, this means that the home is pregnant with opportunity, be it for a recuperative process or for the instigation of a radical reordering of urban life. For some writers – Forster and Ford again, but also Wells – domestic space is being constantly impinged upon. And across all of the texts there is a sense that contemporaneous developments in architecture somehow jar with the present moment – that architecture is alienating either because it is mechanistic and inhuman, or because it has been made strange by wartime trauma, or because it lags behind other aspects of modern life.

In the course of this chapter I have dealt with three distinct historical moments, and with multiple written responses to each moment. In doing so I have not wanted to suggest that these different moments are easily collapsed together, or that the individual responses are wholly typical of literary renderings of architecture at that time. Rather I have hoped to pave the way for subsequent chapters, and to show that writers were using architectural space as a way to register change in the twentieth century well before the bombs made it a dangerous reality, or post-war reconstruction made architecture synonymous with the re-ordering of society.

2. 'This Construction of Destruction, This Deposit of the Blast': Writing a Blitzed Architecture, 1940-1945

Cyril Connolly, founder and editor of literary journal *Horizon*, was of the opinion that culture must be afforded special protection during wartime. Writing in an editorial introducing the publication's first number in January 1940 he stated that 'the war is separating culture from life' and 'civilisation is on the operating table and we sit in the waiting room'. In light of the 'suspension of judgement and creative activity' occasioned by the conflict, Connolly's aim in establishing the journal was simply 'to give to writers a place to express themselves, and to readers the best writing we can obtain'.¹⁰⁶ Yet, in spite of this professed need to mitigate in some part the war's impact on the arts, Connolly observed in May of that same year that '[t]he war [...] has so far taken up little space in the contents of *Horizon*', although he suggests that such apparent disengagement is peculiar 'to our contributors, and [has] no bearing on the feeling of the country as a whole, which would seem to be extremely bellicose', and insists that '[t]he war is the enemy of creative activity, and writers and painters are wise and right to ignore it'.¹⁰⁷ Only two months later Connolly would refer to his earlier stance as one of 'airy detachment' which 'we cannot afford', and later still that year he wrote: 'the relation between periodicals and the war is very close [...]; the war permeates not only the poetry of *Horizon*, but the country of *Country Life*, or the architecture of the *Architectural Review*'.¹⁰⁸ The following year he arrived at the polar opposite of his initial position, signing – along with George Orwell, Stephen Spender and others – 'Why Not War Writers?: A Manifesto', calling for literary writers to be reserved from the armed forces in the same manner as their journalist colleagues.¹⁰⁹ Connolly's vacillation suggests a protracted tussle with the question of just what it is a writer should be doing in wartime, at the same time as a comparable question was being raised in architectural circles.¹¹⁰

¹⁰⁶ Editorial, 'Comment', *Horizon*, vol. 1 (January, 1940), 5-6 (p.5).

¹⁰⁷ Editorial, 'Comment', *Ibid.*, 309-314.

¹⁰⁸ Editorial, 'Comment', *Horizon*, vol. 2 (July, 1940), 532-535 (p.533); 'Comment', *Ibid.*, 279-285 (p.283).

¹⁰⁹ 'Why Not War Writers?: A Manifesto', *Horizon*, vol. 4 (October, 1941), 236-239 (p.237).

¹¹⁰ Gill Plain suggests that this uncertainty amongst writers was due at least in part to the sense that 'the writers of the First World War had somehow had the last word on the horror of war', but equally suggests that this did nothing to dispel the 'pervasive sense of obligation. There might be nothing left to say, but something nonetheless had to be said'. *Literature of the 1940s: War, Postwar and 'Peace'* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2013), pp.39-40.

In a 1941 article for *The Architectural Review*, architect and critic Philip Morton Shand asserted that '[t]he only direct connection between the war and modern architecture was that the political creed which unleashed the war had seven years previously been responsible for outlawing it from its former stronghold, Germany'.¹¹¹ Morton Shand describes the rise of Nazism as an interruption, the diversion of an art form, formerly in rude health, from its natural course. Indeed he fears that the blow dealt to modern architecture by the twentieth century's second great war may well be a fatal one: 'Conceivably this enigmatic war, which is bound to end so much, will end modern architecture, as we have known it, as well'.¹¹² However else it affected the trajectory of twentieth-century architecture, the Second World War brought Britain's building industry to an almost complete halt for its duration. Moreover, and most notably and intensely during the Blitz that lasted from 7th September 1940 until 10th May 1941 (although this onslaught would be followed by the 'little Blitz' in the first months of 1944, as well as the V-1 and V-2 attacks, between June 1944 and March 1945), London became the site of architectural destruction rather than construction.¹¹³

On the night of 29th December 1940 the City of London was subjected to an especially vicious bombing raid. Among the many buildings damaged or destroyed was Eyre and Spottiswoode's printing house on Gunpowder Alley, just north of Fleet Street, which was engaged by the Architectural Press, the publisher of both *The Architectural Review* and *The Architects' Journal*. As the printing house burned so did the January editions of both publications.¹¹⁴ Despite their shared fate the two journals responded rather differently to the architectural destruction engendered by the Blitz, and indeed to the war in general. The *Journal* concerned itself – before, during and after the events of the Blitz – with the question of how architects might be usefully employed in the course of the war effort. Its answer, most frequently, was that a good number of men from the profession should be reserved at home to

¹¹¹ Philip Morton Shand, 'E. Gunnar Asplund', *The Architectural Review*, vol. 89 (May, 1941), 99-102 (p.99).

¹¹² *Ibid.*, p.99.

¹¹³ Slight qualification is needed here as *The War History of the Architect's Department, 1939 to 1945* (unpublished) states: 'In many cases work on buildings already under construction continued, although with difficulty owing to increasing labour and transport troubles; schemes still in the drawing-board stage were, however, temporarily set aside'. Unknown author, *The War History of the Architect's Department, 1939 to 1945*, London Metropolitan Archive, LCC/AR/WAR/1/29, p.66.

¹¹⁴ Editorial, *The Architectural Review*, vol. 89 (January-February, 1941), not paginated; Editorial, 'The Journal's Printers', *The Architects' Journal*, vol. 93 (January, 1941), p.2.

carry out repair work.¹¹⁵ By contrast, the *Review* had been almost completely silent on the subject of the war prior to reporting the destruction of its printers, and even then it was not until June 1941 that it explained that, up until that point, it had operated under ‘a policy of not giving its space to war-time architectural topics’ because ‘the best service it could perform was to try and maintain the cultural values of peace-time lest these become submerged in the expediencies of war-time, with its distorted values’.¹¹⁶ This was followed in July by a *Destruction and Reconstruction* special issue. The special was the *Review*’s first foray into ‘post-war planning’ – crucially a preparation for action, but not action itself – a theme that would come to dominate its pages, and even more so those of the *Journal*, up until and beyond the conclusion of the war.

The wartime writing of both the *Review* and the *Journal*, and what was omitted from their pages as much as what was included, points towards a shared uncertainty as to what it meant to be an architect, or indeed an architectural critic, during the war – to be a part of the building industry in a period of only destruction. Some members of the profession found official roles suited to their specialist skills and knowledge. For example, the Architects’ Department of the London County Council was responsible for training and administering members of the Rescue Service, for running the War Debris and Disposal Service, and for keeping the War Damage Survey, as well as being involved in the provision of emergency water supplies.¹¹⁷ Just prior to the war Berthold Lubetkin drafted designs for a number of air-raid shelters for the residents of Finsbury Borough, although these would be rejected in April 1939 ‘on the grounds of impracticability’.¹¹⁸ Some academics and critics also found appropriate war work: Nikolaus Pevsner was a firewatcher, stationed on the roof of Birkbeck College’s lecture hall, while James Maude Richards, then editor of the *Review*, along with a fellow contributor to the publication, John Betjeman, fulfilled the same role at St Paul’s Cathedral.¹¹⁹ Writers too were engaged in official war work, and while some found themselves employed

¹¹⁵ See, for example, Editorial, ‘Architects in 1941’, *The Architects’ Journal*, vol. 93 (January, 1941), p.3, and Editorial, ‘Bombs and the Architect’, *Ibid.*, p.75.

¹¹⁶ Editorial, ‘The Architectural Review and the War’, *The Architectural Review*, vol. 89 (June, 1941), p.117.

¹¹⁷ *The War History of the Architect’s Department, 1939 to 1945*.

¹¹⁸ Juliet Gardiner, *The Blitz: The British Under Attack* (London: HarperCollins, 2010), pp.77-78.

¹¹⁹ Susie Harries, *Nikolaus Pevsner: The Life* (London: Pimlico, 2013), p.292; Gardiner, *The Blitz*, pp.237-238.

in roles reasonably well suited to their craft, many volunteered as part of the Civil Defence Service (Betjeman and Graham Greene, for example, both famously worked at the Ministry of Information early in the war, carrying out, respectively, their fire-watching and ARP duties after hours). However, there was a crucial difference between the experience of those in the architectural profession and those who wrote literary fiction for a living: while you could not build in a burning city, you could certainly write. Conditions for writing were, at times, incredibly hostile, in that frequent bombardment is hostile to any activity, however self-contained and self-sufficient. But although the Blitz effectively rendered the practice of architecture impossible, it only made writing more necessary, I will argue, for both writers and architects.

In my first chapter I discussed some instances in which architectural space was used by writers to register what they perceived to be moments of profound change, be it a moment already passed or a moment pregnant with potential. The architecture described was itself often implicated in that moment as an agent of change, but it was also made to stand for wider-reaching change that went beyond the physical reality of bricks, mortar and reinforced concrete. For the Home Front texts (both fiction and non-fiction) discussed in the course of the current chapter, architectural space is absolutely implicated in the present moment. It is used neither to evoke a past nor to imagine a markedly different future, but to register immediately observable, tangible, destructive change: a shift in the relationship between Londoners and the city's architecture, occasioned by the Blitz.

In November 1941 *The Architectural Review* published an article by Ernő Goldfinger entitled 'The Sensation of Space'. Its stated aim was to 'scientifically' analyse 'aesthetic emotion', and specifically that emotion which is triggered by 'the sensation of space'. Goldfinger is concerned with how a space acts upon those that use it, with architecture as lived, visceral experience.¹²⁰ It is a concern that, whether consciously or otherwise, taps into the mood of contemporaneous accounts of wartime London. In the context of the raids and their immediate aftermaths, 'architecture' was no longer primarily a profession, an artistic practice, a subject for historians, critics and journalists, but a visceral, dangerous, and even deadly, experience. While Goldfinger's article is interested in how architecture acts upon an

¹²⁰ Ernő Goldfinger, 'The Sensation of Space', *The Architectural Review*, vol. 90 (November, 1941), 129-131.

individual via their senses, during the Blitz architecture had an additional, far more brutal, impact upon the occupants of urban centres, routinely killing or injuring people through fire or collapse. If, as suggested in the previous chapter, writers as different as E.M. Forster and Wyndham Lewis both shared an interest in the relationship between the individual and architectural space during the first decades of the twentieth century, then the Blitz sharpened this interest amongst those who wrote through the air-raids. The bombs violently transformed the fabric of London, rendering both the literal and imagined solidity of architectural spaces terrifyingly, and often tragically, unreliable. In a passage particularly evocative of this altered relationship William Sansom, writer and member of the Auxiliary Fire Service (later the National Fire Service), writes,

One is enclosed by material that is breaking up, perhaps slowly, perhaps suddenly in a quick pang of disruption and relief. The world is warping, blistering, weakening, sagging and falling. The knot of the builder's old artistry is being loosened by slow fingers of heat.¹²¹

All the texts considered in my previous chapter were interested in the agency of architectural space – in its capacity to affect the behaviour of one who occupies it. Blitz writers described a different kind of architectural agency: the sudden, violent, physical agency of a damaged building.

There was, as Connolly's *Horizon* editorials indicate, no clear consensus as to how writers should respond to the war, but the viscosity of architectural space offered one possible avenue for engagement. Through activating architectural space in their writing of it, by documenting the 'warping, blistering, weakening, sagging and falling', writers responded to architecture's new, literal and violent agency, and to the particular conditions of life under the bombs. Thus the agency of architectural space is a central concern, and a central actor, in the literature of the Home Front. This is writing with an architectural core, and, I will argue, the converse is also true: unable to build, architects turned in part to description and documentation, so that writing became a significant facet of architectural practice during the war.

¹²¹ William Sansom, 'Journey into Smoke', in *Something Terrible, Something Lovely* (London: Hogarth Press, 1948), pp.196-204 (p.201). Subsequent references to this edition are given in parentheses within the main body of the text.

There are thus two senses in which some of the concerns of the previous chapter come together in my reading of this wartime material. Firstly, the body and its relationship to architecture, which played an important role in my readings of texts in the previous chapter, takes on a new and greater significance in this one, as the body and architectural space become radically, violently implicated in one another. Secondly, the practices of literature and architecture also become implicated in one another. It is these two interlinked strands that I will follow in the course of the present chapter, taking as my literary focus works by Sansom, Elizabeth Bowen and John Strachey, and reading these alongside the contemporaneous writings of architects and architectural critics. Visual art will serve as an important touchstone in the course of my discussion, as artworks made under the bombs occupy an interesting space between the literary and the architectural, being, particularly in the case of official war art, understood very much as a form of documentation – an account made for posterity – yet simultaneously concerned with a subjective, and thereby fleeting, visceral experience. I will be reading both literary and architectural texts, at different points and in various ways, as in transit between these two modes. The visual art that was produced during the Blitz, often containing both simultaneously, will thus serve as a useful point of reference, and in tracing the shared concerns of writer, architect and painter with the violent, visceral agency of architectural space I hope to contribute to an understanding of the psychological experience of life on the Home Front. In so doing I turn first to the very process of recording, of documentation, itself – its forms and tropes.

‘Sparks from experience’: Documentation and its Limits

In the course of the following section of this chapter I will be concerned with what happened when architects found themselves turning to description, and specifically writing, in the absence of opportunities to actively engage in the fundamentals of their discipline: design and construction. In parallel, I will look at how writers were confronted with, and incorporated into their work, architecture as a visceral experience. I will consider how questions and ideas about documenting the violently altered architectural spaces of the Blitz became a significant preoccupation for writers during the war, be they from a literary or an architectural background.

In the summer of 1942 John Lehmann, editor of *New Writing and Daylight*, registered ‘a certain sense of frustration as one looks round at the literary scene’. The source of the frustration that Lehmann points to is the conviction that previous conflicts had produced their own great literature, but that ‘this war has still found no writer, in prose or verse, to interpret it with anything like such depth and power’. Instead this present war had produced ‘many interesting fragments, many individual stories or poems, many novels that seem to suggest rather than to achieve the desired act of creation’. The fragmentary nature of this war’s literature is, Lehmann posits, a function of the situations that writers find themselves in, and that, consequently, ‘one should restrain one’s impatience, remembering how difficult it is to write against the bombs’.¹²² Bowen, similarly focussed on fragmentation, noted in her postscript to a 1945 edition of *The Demon Lover* that writing in such an environment was an almost involuntary process: ‘The stories had their own momentum, which I had to control. [...] Odd enough in their way [...] they were flying particles of something enormous and inchoate that had been going on. They were sparks from experience’.¹²³ Bowen’s writing is driven by the need to set down on paper that which is taking place in this moment of chaotic transition while the material is still available and fresh, before the moment is lost. Her sense of her own wartime literary output is a perfect example of that to which Rod Mengham and N.H. Reeve refer when they suggest:

A significant amount of the writing of the 1940s understood itself to be raw material to which later construction would bring a necessary finish; such writing predicted that its real, underlying meanings would only become apparent once the mystifying fog of historical circumstance had been dispelled.¹²⁴

Mengham expands upon this idea, suggesting that the war impacted upon both reading and writing habits, particularly in relation to narrative form. Referring to the decline in the number of novels published during the war Mengham states that ‘[t]he novel is put out of action by fragmentation, discontinuity in the social life it is asked

¹²²John Lehmann, ‘The Armoured Writer – I’, *New Writing and Daylight* (London: The Hogarth Press, 1942), pp.153-160.

¹²³ Elizabeth Bowen, ‘Postscript to the first U.S. edition of *The Demon Lover*’, in *The Mulberry Tree*, ed. by Hermione Lee, (London: Virago, 1986), pp.94-99 (p.95).

¹²⁴ Rod Mengham and N.H. Reeve, ‘Introduction’, in *The Fiction of the 1940s: Stories of Survival*, ed. by Rod Mengham and N.H. Reeve (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2001), pp.xi-xiii (p.xi).

to reflect', and points instead to the popularity of short stories. This growth in popularity

made sense not simply because the story was categorically the form of the part as opposed to the whole but because a certain kind of story predominated: it was the kind that did not present an understanding of what was happening *now*, but which merely provided a record of events to be used as material for a reading *later on*, after the 'lull'. Whatever it all meant could only be understood *then*.

Such short stories were 'documentary' in their style.¹²⁵ The impulse behind the 'documentary' fiction of the Second World War was not simply a desire to record for posterity, to memorialise; it also, as Mengham suggests, looked forward to post-war 'reconstruction'. The future was at stake in this literary representation that was also a process of collecting and storing, of taking account of what had been altered and what had been lost; of 'planning' in expectation of a conclusion to the conflict.

An impulse towards documentation, then, was a function of the Blitz experience for writers, both in terms of the working conditions created by the raids and as a strategy, a way in which to begin to rationalise and contain an experience otherwise too chaotic and enormous to comprehend in the moment. Architects too found themselves pushed towards documentation. This was not so much an impulse generated by the experience of life on the Home Front, but rather a fact of life: the working conditions of the Blitz made writing difficult, but they rendered building impossible. Unable yet to begin the city's reconstruction, the documentation of the city's destruction was a meaningful preoccupation open to architects – one that could look forward to post-war reconstruction. In the following pages I am going to explore some of the ways in which the idea of 'documentation' came to the fore in representations of blitzed London. I want first to turn to the writers, and to consider the idea that the experience – both physical and psychological – of the Blitz *demand*ed of writers, and of artists, that a concern with documentation be at the core of attempts at representation. I will then turn to the question of the comparable documentation of the city at war by architects, and specifically to the unpublished text of *The War History of the Architect's Department*.

¹²⁵ Rod Mengham, 'Broken Glass', in *The Fiction of the 1940s*, pp.124-133 (pp.125-126). Plain also identifies 'the urge to document' as being characteristic of wartime writing, and of the literature of the 1940s more generally. *Literature of the 1940s*, p.39.

The demand for writers to think seriously about documentation, about its processes and, crucially, its limits, was made by the viscosity, the very real and immediate dangers of life in London during the war, by falling bombs and burning buildings. Sansom's fireman short stories take these moments of violence as their focus. Both Mengham and Leo Mellor argue that, in these texts, Sansom problematises the documentary process that the narrative voice undertakes, both in that initial moment of the narrator's experience and in its subsequent literary representation.¹²⁶ I will now take some time to unpack this reading, to explore how Sansom's writing undertakes such an operation, and to think about how the problematisation of documentation in these texts – in the sense of both perception and representation – is a response to the *spaces* of the Blitz.

Sansom's fireman stories are most famously collected in *Fireman Flower* (1944), but also appeared in journals such as *Horizon* and *New Writing* during the war, as well as in subsequent collections, and, being derived from his own war work, they are quite literally documentary in nature. But documentation as a process, or series of processes, is a central concern of these stories, a concern that is inexorably tied up with a sense of architecture as visceral experience. As Bowen suggests in her introduction to a collection of Sansom's stories published decades after the war, 'The substance of a Sansom story is sensation. The subject is sensation'.¹²⁷ Such a focus on sensation is made possible by Sansom's treatment of temporality: what Bowen refers to as his 'extraordinary extension of the moment'.¹²⁸ The effect of this 'extension' is that it opens that very moment up to meticulous examination, lending an extra-sensory quality to the narrative, as in 'The Wall':

Very suddenly a long rattling crack of bursting brick and mortar perforated the moment. And then the upper half of that five-storey building heaved over towards us. It hung there, poised for a timeless second before rumbling down at us. I was thinking of nothing at all and then I was thinking of everything in the world. In that single second my brain digested every detail of the scene.¹²⁹

¹²⁶ Mengham, 'Broken Glass', pp.126-127; Mellor, *Reading the Ruins*, pp.47-52.

¹²⁷ Elizabeth Bowen, 'Introduction', in *The Stories of William Sansom* (London: Hogarth Press, 1963) pp.7-12 (p.10).

¹²⁸ Bowen, 'Introduction', in *The Stories of William Sansom*, p.9.

¹²⁹ William Sansom, 'The Wall', in *Fireman Flower*, 3rd edn. (London: The Hogarth Press, 1966), pp.167-172 (p.168). 'The Wall' was originally published in *Horizon*, July 1941. Subsequent references to this edition are given in parentheses within the main body of the text. *Fireman Flower* was originally published by the Hogarth Press in 1944.

Temporality is rendered as something physical, something *spatial*, and it is described in the same terms as the architecture that is burning and collapsing around the narrator. Time is halted in mid-motion; it is broken, even done away with entirely. This treatment of temporality serves to describe a kind of heightened perception, an almost superhuman process of sensory documentation, and it is described in documentary terms: 'New eyes opened at the sides of my head so that, from within, I photographed a hemispherical panorama bounded by the huge length of the building in front of me and the narrow lane on either side' (p.168). Sensory perception is a process of *recording*. Moreover, this process that documents the space around the narrator constitutes his visceral experience of that space.¹³⁰ Such extra-sensory perception *is a sensation* for the narrator – seeing and feeling are collapsed together:

I had leisure to remark many things. For instance, that an iron derrick, slightly to the left, would not hit me. This derrick stuck out from the building and I could feel its sharpness and hardness as clearly as if I had run my body intimately over its contour (p.171).

Perception is sensation; the narrator *feels* his surroundings, almost synaesthetically. Body and building mingle through perception as that perception is spatialised, even given its own architectural dimensions, so that when the titular wall finally does collapse the narrator experiences the sound as 'a thunderclap condensed into the space of an eardrum' (p.172). But in spite of – or, perhaps, because of – the intensity of his experience, the narrator emphasises the distance between his sense, and thus his description, of what happened, and the reality of the event: 'Whether the

¹³⁰ Leonard Rosoman's *A House Collapsing on Two Firemen, Shoe Lane, London EC4* shows an identical occurrence to that detailed by Sansom in 'The Wall'. In fact, Stuart Sillars notes that the work 'was painted from direct personal experience', and that Rosoman completed the painting while 'working as a fireman with the National Fire Service at Maresfield Gardens, London, a short distance away from stations where William Sansom and Stephen Spender worked'. Angela Weight notes that Sansom and Rosoman were friends, and that Rosoman provided an illustration – itself unremarkable – for 'The Wall' upon its republication in 1942 in *Fire and Water: An NFS Anthology*. Moreover, she raises the possibility that the 'Len' of Sansom's story, one of the narrator's fellow survivors, may be Leonard. Sillars notes that the tones and textures of Rosoman's painting recall the 'blurred, unfocussed manner of a rapid documentary photograph', suggesting that the form and content of Sansom's written account point to an experience the particular sensorial quality of which his colleagues, Rosoman among them, would have recognised only too well. Stuart Sillars, *British Romantic Art and the Second World War* (London: Macmillan, 1991), pp.84-85; Angela Weight, *Leonard Rosoman: A War Retrospective, 1939-45* (London: Imperial War Museum, 1989), p.6.

descending wall actually paused in its fall I can never know. Probably it never did. Probably it only seemed to hang there' (p.170).

'The Wall' is a story, as Mark Rawlinson suggests, 'aimed at overcoming the unrepresentableness of the violent sublime'.¹³¹ But, crucially, it is an attempt that fails, and it is this sense of a distance between experience and representation that emphasises the failure. For Rawlinson the story's 'narrative deceleration' is the strategy through which Sansom attempts to represent the unrepresentable, and he suggests that the strategy operates by creating 'a division of the subject of the story', which is to say a division between the narrator, who is subject to the events described, and the narrative voice, which describes those events.¹³² There is a comparable division, a similar distance, in Sansom's 'The Witnesses'. Indeed, it is this distance itself that is the subject of 'The Witnesses', a story 'narrated' by a fireman's eyes: the witnesses of the title. It is concerned with the potentially tragic consequences of this distance and is an account of an episode in which a fireman throws himself from a wall into the inferno that he is fighting. He takes evasive action, convinced that the pump operator, with whom he has argued earlier, has increased the pressure in the hose, which would throw him from the wall. He jumps before this can happen, in a 'final act of survival' that is doomed to failure.¹³³ The fireman becomes convinced of his colleague's malicious intent when he sees that his 'eyes glittered with furious amusement, the lips drew back on teeth half opened in a yellow snarl of delight' (p.13). But the distance between subjective perception and objective reality is interrogated by the narrative voice:

That was what happened. But to this day we cannot be sure that the pressure ever really increased. We never saw the pump operator's hand move the throttle. Perhaps the fireman never really saw the smile, perhaps the smile never existed? It is quite possible, after all, that it was nothing more than an expression of fear at the sudden bright glare. That is possible! A moment's fear transformed into a smile of hatred only by the fireman's brain, the unreliable agent that informed us, the witnesses, his eyes (p.14).

¹³¹ Mark Rawlinson, *British Writing of the Second World War* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2000), p.97.

¹³² *Ibid.*, p.97.

¹³³ William Sansom, 'The Witnesses', in *The Penguin New Writing*, ed. by John Lehmann, vol.17 (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1943), pp. 9-14 (p.14). Subsequent references to this edition are given in parentheses within the main body of the text.

The fireman imagines a danger, constructing for himself a narrative in which his colleague enacts revenge. Normal interaction between the eye and the brain is reversed, or, at least, the process is complicated. In this moment it is the brain – and thereby the imaginative, creative act – that has primacy in the process of perception, in the fireman's experience of the world around him, and not the eyes, which document that world. Consequently the *reliability* of documentation is compromised by the imagination in two respects, in that neither sensorial experience in any given moment – and particularly in a moment of violent intensity – nor subsequent representations of that experience can constitute an accurate account of events. The body is the site and agent of this unreliable documentation, as sensorial experience and imagination collide.

Thus a kind of disconnect exists at the heart of artistic representations of blitzed London, produced by the simultaneous existence of two seemingly contradictory impulses: on the one hand the drive to capture, to record, to document, and on the other the admission that the documentary form itself is not up to that task. This disconnection – this struggle to contain both a representation and the admission that the process of representation itself is compromised – is registered in the literature of the Blitz. Referring to Bowen's postscript to *The Demon Lover*, Mengham suggests that the literary conditions that she describes, namely, in Bowen's words, 'the pressure of subject matter building up behind the inadequacy of traditional methods of making sense', constitute 'a spectacular failure of realism', and moreover that, in the writing of both Bowen and Sansom 'the subject matter of documentary realism begins to turn strange, so that what can be seen starting to infiltrate the writing is the logic of dream or nightmare.'¹³⁴ Documentary itself is subject to distortion; it becomes unsettled, abstracted.

This movement between the ostensible solidity of the documentary form and its supposed opposite, abstraction, is described in Sansom's 'Journey into Smoke'. The story follows a group of firemen as they descend deep into a burning warehouse in search of 'the seat of the fire' (p.199), a journey that induces a number of hallucinatory experiences in the narrator. First he experiences a profound sense of alienation from his own body:

¹³⁴ Mengham, 'Broken Glass', pp.129-130.

[T]hose might not have been my hands at all. They were two new hands that had by chance nestled into the cuffs of my tunic. They seemed to be wearing skin-tight red rubber gloves that glistened wetly, like the gloves of a surgeon, like the oiled body of a camera nude. The thought came to me, slyly, almost humorously, that I ought to retch. On such occasions, I thought, people retch. But standing there in the company of my red hands, I had no desire whatsoever to retch. At a moment like this, the stomach really disappears and one is all head. These moments, reputedly so subjective, sometimes produce a most immaculate detachment. So I just stood there, independent of time, suspended in that sudden sphere of momentary light, absorbing the whole scene upon the clear and leisurely film of a detached mind (p.196).

As well as his sense that the hands he is looking down at are not his own, the narrator also experiences a similar compartmentalisation of his body to that which is described in 'The Witnesses', although here the narrative voice occupies the 'head' and it is the stomach that is 'detached'. Moreover, in 'Journey into Smoke' as in 'The Witnesses' Sansom calls into question the reliability of sensorial experience within the context of such a violent scenario, but here the notion of this unreliability



Figure 3, A House Collapsing on Two Firemen, Shoe Lane, EC4

is taken a step further. In the course of 'The Wall' as well as 'The Witnesses' Sansom suggests that the objective documentation of such a scene is rendered impossible by the sheer viscosity of the experience; such experience is always embodied, and thus subject to the vagaries and distortions of the senses. In 'Journey into Smoke' this relationship is inverted, so that rather than an embodied subjectivity the narrator experiences 'a most immaculate detachment'. Here again, as in the other two stories, he experiences time as having been

abruptly halted, or, rather, imagines that he stands somehow outside of it. And, yet again, the process of perception is described as being like the workings of a camera, which is to say a process of documentation, and the narrator suggests that he is even able to find a certain serenity, an escape from the violence around him, in this mechanistic process.

Referring to this same passage Mellor argues that ‘the photographic or cinematic [...] offers the only hope for narrative stabilisation’; the narrator resorts to understanding his experience in terms of and through the documentary form in an attempt to establish a sense of ‘causal logic’.¹³⁵ But immediately following this passage in the story there is a concerted shift away from the language of documentary:

There are painters who rely upon a fairly abstract combination of textures to define the composition of their pictures. Our floodlit alley-way appeared then to be very much like one of these pictures. For a moment it lost its reason and became a startling erection of thick pigments. Straight ahead, a high bare wall, scarred by blast and splinter, washed by huge streaks of pulverised brick and plaster, so that the regular mortar lines had disappeared and all that remained was a high mass of brown and pink. At the bottom a regular square of black was the doorway through which we had been ordered to enter. Then the dry pink abruptly stopped as that wetly varnished rich red plane upon which we were standing flushed across a straight horizon two-thirds down the canvas. And then there was nothing else in the foreground but the rich mass of dully glistening red. Otherwise, a hazed brushing of smoke here and there; one darker streak of blacker smoke that bubbled up from the dark square doorway. And somewhere the silhouetted figures of Hegel and Sid, although these were of no significance. The light went out. Reality reasserted itself (pp.196-197).

The light thrown out by the fire that the men are fighting has drastically altered the appearance of the built space around them, so that it has taken on the appearance of a painting, an abstracted representation, of that same space. The description of a wall that has been ‘scarred by blast and splinter’ and ‘washed by huge streaks of pulverised brick and plaster’ so that all definition has disappeared leaving only ‘a high mass of brown and pink’ is strikingly reminiscent of the melange of colour in Sansom’s fellow fireman Leonard Rosoman’s *A House Collapsing on Two Firemen, Shoe Lane, London EC4* (1940, Figure 3, see note 130 above), a painting which in its title alone implies a documentary impulse at work, while the image itself seems to move between the figurative and the abstract. Meanwhile the variety of textures described in the scene – ‘dry’, ‘wetly varnished’, ‘dully glistening’, ‘hazed brushing’, ‘bubbled’ – recalls the work of Graham Sutherland’s *Devastation* series:

¹³⁵ Mellor, *Reading the Ruins*, pp.56-57.

its collage-like imposition of different shapes upon one another: the scratched, sketchy surfaces of ruined buildings emerging from smooth, pastel-shaded backgrounds, very much like the ‘startling erection of thick pigments’ that confront Sansom’s narrator. Crucially, this shift from a documentary form – in which the scene is recorded ‘upon the clear and leisurely film of a detached mind’ – to a more abstract composition of the scene is here engendered by the loss of ‘reason’. And it is the built environment itself, the ‘floodlit alley-way’, and not the narrator, that loses its reason.

An article by the artist John Piper entitled ‘The Architecture of Destruction’ and published in *The Architectural Review*’s *Destruction and Reconstruction* special offers a series of prose sketches of some of London’s ecclesiastical ruins. Following a description of one bombed church he posits: ‘Surrealism prophesied nothing half so fantastic as the sudden ruin of such a church’.¹³⁶ The documentary form seeks to capture the solidity, the reliability, the *knowability* of a real-life scene. In so doing it not only mimics reality, but is turned back on that which it mimics, becoming, as Sansom’s writing attests, a way in which to comprehend and re-represent, however imperfectly, visceral experience. But when that reality has been unsettled, disrupted, shattered, then the rigidity, the clarity of documentary can no longer contain such an experience: it has been rendered entirely unknowable in these terms. The narrator of ‘Journey into Smoke’, along with Piper, recognises that the scenes created by the Blitz resemble, and even exceed, painterly forms that challenge the apparent solidity of reality. This recognition is an assertion that these experiences, these spaces, the *experience* of these spaces, can only be documented in a form that is profoundly *un*-documentary if their representation is to be in any way meaningful.

The War History of the Architect’s Department lacks the power and beauty of Sansom’s writing. This is perhaps unsurprising. As an account of the Department’s official activity in aid of the war effort the unattributed *History* contains much statistical data. However, this data sits alongside some prose accounts that strive to capture the experiences of those engaged by the Department in its war work. Consequently the *History* is documentary in two senses: it is a record of events, but also, and crucially, it is ‘documentary’ in Mengham’s sense of the word: it is engaged in the literary project of ‘making sense’, or of trying to. And, in spite of its

¹³⁶ John Piper, ‘The Architecture of Destruction’, *The Architectural Review*, 90 (July, 1941), 25-26 (p.26).

literary shortcomings, the *History* is comparable to Sansom's fireman stories in, again, two respects: firstly in its concern with the embodiedness of life under the bombs, with the viscosity of working with and within an architecture which is at that very moment undergoing a process of ruination; secondly through its tacit admission that a form which is documentary – that seeks to describe using literal language – is limited, and cannot adequately contain such an experience. I will consider both of these in turn.

In reading a concern with architecture as visceral experience in the *History* I am focussing on a section of the text that is not particularly representative, both in its form and its content, of the document as a whole. This is a point to which I will return shortly, but for now I want to pay particular attention to the author's insistence on the *sensation* of architectural space. The following is taken from a section entitled 'The London Heavy Rescue Service', and specifically from a sub-section called 'The Service in Action, 1940-41':

The Rescue man was not only working on the incident, he became a part of it. [...] He was, generally speaking, a labourer or a skilled man, with the specialised knowledge and training that enabled him to be of such value in conditions which others could not be expected to understand. By his calling he was almost able to foresee how brickwork, floors, steel-framed structures and reinforced concrete might behave when subjected to the eccentric stresses and strains which followed bomb damage. [...] He knew that the steel joist above him would hold the collapsed roof of timber and the weight of tiles piled upon it, but he also knew that the fractured pier upon which the joist itself was resting might at any moment give way, crushing him and the casualty he was trying to reach. He knew how to cut through the cast-iron of the bath which lay across the route he was tunnelling and how to use the mahogany frame of a wrecked piano to shore up the walls and roof of his cave-like working space so that he could bring his casualty safely away. He learned to sense the value of every brick and piece of wood that lined the dark dust-filled channel. In the hours of patient working, handing out piece by piece and handful by handful the crumbled plaster and rubbish, he did not stop to think of the many places which needed only a touch to set the whole mass moving, but he knew them as he knew his own hand.¹³⁷

What is striking about this passage is the intimacy of the relationship between the Rescue man and the architectural space that he is inhabiting. This is due in part, the

¹³⁷ *The War History of the Architect's Department*, pp.20-21.

author suggests, to his peacetime profession, his ‘calling’, that has given him the requisite knowledge to navigate such an environment in relative safety. But it is also a product of the space, of a kind of visceral experience engendered by the volatility of the architecture. Through repeatedly inhabiting such spaces the Rescue man becomes able to ‘sense’ the various possibilities for movement, for collapse, contained in the damaged architecture. His understanding of such possibilities becomes innate – they are *known* rather than *thought*, and it is an embodied knowledge. The Rescue man’s body is implicated in the architectural space.

A passage from Sansom’s ‘Building Alive’ describes this same intimacy between body and architectural space. The narrator, having just entered a building recently damaged by a falling V-weapon, notes how silent the space is.

Then, under the steady burning of this bulb, against its silent continuing effort, other sounds began to whisper. My number two, Barnes, looked at me quickly – the building was alive. Our boots had thudded on the stairs. Now for a moment, no more, they were quiet. They were silent, the light was silent, but falsely – for beneath these obvious silences other sounds, faint, intractable, began to be heard. Creakings, a groan of wood, a light spatter of moving plaster, from somewhere the trickle of water from a broken pipe. The whole house rustled. A legion of invisible platermice [sic] seemed to be pattering up and down the walls. Little, light sounds, but massing a portentous strength. The house, suddenly stretched by blast, was settling itself. It might settle down on to new and firm purchases, it might be racking itself further, slowly, slowly grinding apart before a sudden collapse. [...] Walking in such houses, the walls and floors are forgotten; the mind pictures only the vivid inner framework of beams and supports, where they might run and how, under stress, they might behave; the house is perceived as a skeleton.¹³⁸

Once again an architectural space, in the very moment of its sudden and violent ruination, is described as ‘alive’. Yet, whereas in both Sansom and Rosoman’s representations of buildings transformed by fire it is the literal movement of the flames that suggests a kind of vitality, here, as in the *History*, it is the *potential* for movement. Sansom’s narrator, like the Rescue man, possesses an innate, embodied sensitivity to these potentialities that becomes activated as he moves within the

¹³⁸ William Sansom, ‘Building Alive’, in *The Stories of William Sansom*, pp.82-86 (p.83). Set in 1944 but originally published in January 1946, in *Horizon*. See Rawlinson, *British Writing of the Second World War*, p.99.

space. Moreover, the end of this passage emphasises the link between the body and architectural space, with the narrator imagining the building as ‘a skeleton’: the body stripped down to its fundamental, structural components; the body at its most architectural. The sheer viscosity of the experience grants the fireman a detailed, plan-like knowledge of the architecture he inhabits: an intimate familiarity.

For Sansom, the documentary form of his texts must inevitably rupture; the experience he describes will not adhere to the formal ‘logic’ within which he has tried to contain it. ‘There is at least’, he writes in a diary entry dated 25th September 1941,

one saving grace in the dreadful performance of modern battle – when those who have fought in it have died, no-one will know what it was like. The experience is too violent for the arts to transcribe; there will ever [sic] be an adequate reportage to convey to posterity a living idea of the truth of such experience. Posterity may indeed speculate on the battle’s trailed miseries, on the histories of courage and endurance, on the vigil before battle and the tired aftermath, even on the appearance of the battle itself with its reported volumes of shell and blood and tactic – but of the real sensations of the thick of the battle it will know nothing. It cannot. The pace has become too violent, machines move too fast for the nerves’ perception, the din outsounds the ear, movements and winds and lights strike with such a giant impact that this can scarcely be perceived and even then never, neither in the symbols of language nor in the tones of paint, be recorded.¹³⁹

As in his firemen short stories, Sansom draws a link between the impossibility of adequate representation and the unreliability of perception, finding that modern technology has created an experience that is too overwhelming in its speed, scale and intensity for the human senses to capture in the moment, let alone for the imagination to communicate after the event. Documentation is doomed to failure; formal rupture is an inevitability. And more than this. Not only, Sansom suggests, is there, to echo again Mengham’s words, a ‘spectacular failure of realism’, but that which comes to take its place – figurative language, the abstractions of paint – fails also. Part of *The War History of the Architect’s Department* provides an example of such a failure in action.

¹³⁹ William Sansom, ‘A Fireman’s Journal’, in Stefan Schimanski and Henry Treece (eds.), *Leaves in the Storm: A Book of Diaries* (London: Lindsay Drummond, 1947), pp.133-143 (pp.141-142).

The *History* is an official document, in that it is an account by the Department of its own wartime activities. It is meticulous in its detail, describing how the Department reacted to the exigencies of the conflict by adapting existing services and branches, and by forming new ones. It records the various resources that were at the Department's disposal, and details the training that employees undertook in order to fulfil their new duties. It is, by-and-large, the prose equivalent of the War Damage Survey – a means through which to present data, with plenty to tell us about the scale of the Blitz experience, but revealing little of its *qualities*. Except, in just a few instances, the *History* does indeed make space for such considerations, and it does so by breaking out of the confines of the documentary form.

One example of such an instance is the above passage describing the experience of the Rescue man. In its focus on the *quality* of a particular experience – even though the ‘experience’ described is an artificial composite, intended to stand for the experiences of a number of different individuals in a range of different spatial and temporal locations – this passage is an example of how the *History* moves away from the documentation of a project like the War Damage Survey, and engages in ‘documentary’ in Mengham’s sense of the word. The passage is an attempt to make sense of a kind of experience that was produced by the war, and in particular by the spaces of the war. Another example of a movement away from the documentary form that constitutes much of the *History* also appears in ‘The Service in Action, 1940-41’, at the very beginning of the subsection. It reads:

There was not much time left after the first August raids before the blitz fell upon London in earnest. On 7th September the bombers came over in the afternoon and attacked the docks, leaving a gigantic mushroom of black oily smoke hanging over the city; a symbol of Nazi confidence in the doom of London. The same night some 250 planes bombed again and the night blitz was on. These nights brought with them a continuous accumulation of nerve-racking experiences. Little sleep was obtainable and the only rest was on the hard floor underneath the stairs, in the cellar, in the Anderson shelter in the garden or in the public shelters and tubes. The devil’s concerto played all night long until the mind and body ached for the relief of what turned out after all to be but a short interval before the next movement. The morning brought cold extremities and sore sleepless eyes and the excursion to work was subjected to cheerfully borne and constantly changing circuitous journeys and hold-ups. The eyes were fascinated by mad but exhilarating feathery circles and twists in the autumn sky, which

were watched with tremendous pride and gratitude; the little planes which were saving London from the horrors of complete devastation. The day was punctuated by warnings and all-clears, with the accompaniment of gunfire and bomb explosions, which never seemed quite so terrifying as during the long dark hours. The journey home was by ill-lit or completely unlit buses and trains and the walk from the station was through quiet, black streets with the ever-present menace overhead, tuning up again for the night's performance.¹⁴⁰

In the context of the preceding part of the *History* this passage heralds a marked shift in focus away from a statistical, and towards a more experiential, account.¹⁴¹ As with the Rescue man episode, there is a concern with both physical and psychological circumstances and sensations: the peculiar quality of existence under almost perpetual bombardment; the war's impact on the most quotidian of activities. But, in this passage, there is also a stylistic shift as the author introduces figurative language into the text. Crucially, such language occurs at those moments when the technologies of war to which Sansom alludes intervene: falling bombs create 'a gigantic mushroom of black oily smoke'; the accumulated noise of enemy aircraft, explosions and anti-aircraft guns becomes 'the devil's concerto'; RAF planes overhead mark out 'exhilarating feathery circles' in the air. The *History's* author comes up against the same problem of indescribability encountered by writers of fiction and, like these writers, finds that the documentary form within which he has been working is unable to contain the experiences he is describing. This failure of the form is, Sansom suggests, inevitable. That which takes its place – figurative language, painterly abstraction – fails also; it too falls short of capturing the experience. But the impulse to attempt such a description in the first place, doomed to failure as it is, is one shared by literary and architectural writers alike during the war. It is an impulse that drives writers to document, and in documenting to try and find a way to 'make sense'.

¹⁴⁰ *The War History of the Architect's Department*, p.19.

¹⁴¹ Thereafter the *History* becomes once more a straightforwardly statistical account, with two notable exceptions: the account of the Rescue man's experiences (excerpted above) and another subsection within 'The London Heavy Rescue Service' entitled 'A Day in February, 1944'. This passage reads like a fictionalised account, complete with the recorded speech of 'characters'. The *History's* introductory 'Note' states that 'the characters introduced [in this passage] are fictitious'. See 'Note', not paginated, and pp.31-40.

‘What a domestic sort of war this is’: Public/Private Stories on the Home Front

Both Sansom and the *History*’s author activate architectural space in writing it, giving it an agency within their texts that reflects its new, radical agency within the city. It is this process of activation, and the ways in which it problematises representation, that shapes the form of these texts. In the following section I want to think about this activation in relation to the writing of Strachey and Bowen. I am interested in how this activation might be mobilised in wartime, how it might move beyond being simply a strategy through which to document the Home Front, and become a strategy for writing that is an active agent within and in response to the conditions of the Blitz.

In his 25th September diary entry Sansom writes of ‘the dreadful performance of modern battle’. What is striking about his use of this particular phrase is that he writes it not from a faraway foreign battlefield, but from within London. The city became a battleground, and the phrase ‘Home Front’ was not merely a propaganda device but an apt term for describing the experience of civilians at home. The fact that the number of fatalities amongst members of the British Army did not surpass the number amongst the civilian population until autumn 1942 is indicative of the extent to which the war came to the British public.¹⁴²

During the Blitz Graham Sutherland worked under contract to the War Artists Advisory Committee (WAAC). Consequently the drawings which he produced to this end, and of which the *Devastation* series are a prime example, were both artwork and propaganda, or rather artwork subject to the strictures of propaganda, being as they were required to pass through censorship. In particular he was not permitted to show individuals killed or injured as a result of enemy action, on the grounds that it would have been demoralising to do so. Sansom, I have suggested, is interested in the unreliability of the body and its senses. Unable to reliably register the radically different experiences elicited by new technologies and the new spaces they blasted into being, the body is compromised as creative conduit for those experiences. But the specific conditions of the Blitz render the body problematic as the subject as well as the agent of artistic representation, and its problematisation is political. Martin Hammer calls the ‘images of horribly twisted

¹⁴² Gardiner, *The Blitz*, p.360.

lift shafts and warped girders' of Sutherland's *Devastation* series 'surrogates for the human lives lost in German bombing raids'.¹⁴³ In these pictures the architectural 'wounds' stand for the bodily wounds that cannot, that must not, be shown. But it is not simply that human suffering was only shown by proxy because to do otherwise would be damaging to morale, but that the removal of bodies from images of the city was calculated to actively improve morale, as Rawlinson argues: 'The absence of the human body from aestheticizing descriptions of ruined cityscapes is fundamental to the reinvention of London as an emblem of positive wartime outcomes in both the military and political spheres'.¹⁴⁴ Such an endeavour is more readily observable in the context of a project such as the WAAC: a cog in the larger propaganda machine that saw print and broadcast media proclaiming slogans such as the Ministry of Information approved 'Britain Can Take It'.¹⁴⁵ One might even conjecture that the gutted, set-like buildings in Bowen's 'London, 1940' – a piece which also finds the writer confronted with an 'open gash' in the side of a building and observing that, 'As bodies shed blood, buildings shed mousey dust' – stand in for the maimed human, although Bowen herself suggests that this is due to her particular sensibilities as a writer rather than a politically motivated unwillingness to show suffering.¹⁴⁶

But what of those instances in which wounded architecture and wounded body *are* represented alongside one another, and not only alongside, but as intimately involved with one another, as is the case in John Strachey's *Post D?* This text finds no need for an architectural surrogate for the body, as Strachey unflinchingly shows ordinary people suffering, dying and dead. I want now to think about the politics of Strachey's representation of bodies – his unusually frequent and vivid depictions of the wounded body and damaged building in tandem – and of the politics of the text more widely, particularly in relation to wartime propaganda. I read the text with this emphasis because, I will argue, Strachey's insistence on

¹⁴³ Martin Hammer, *Graham Sutherland: Landscapes, War Scenes, Portraits 1924-1950* (London: Scala, 2005), p.28.

¹⁴⁴ Rawlinson, *British Writing of the Second World War*, p.4.

¹⁴⁵ Gardiner, *The Blitz*, p.162.

¹⁴⁶ Elizabeth Bowen, 'London, 1940', in *The Mulberry Tree*, ed. by Hermione Lee (London: Virago, 1986), pp.21-25 (p.22). Of the stories collected in *The Demon Lover* Bowen writes, 'These are all wartime, none of them war, stories. There are no accounts of war action even as I knew it – for instance, air raids. [...] These are, more, studies of climate, war-climate, and of the strange growths it raised'. 'Postscript to the first U.S. edition of *The Demon Lover*', p.95. Bowen is concerned with the psychological impact of life under the bombs, and indeed the attendant suffering, but in taking this as her focus she consciously excludes the active prosecution of the war effort, unlike, for example, Sansom.

showing human suffering, and, crucially, on depicting damaged bodies with damaged buildings, serves to undermine a particular set of ideas pertaining to the Home Front. I must first identify those ideas, and how they are engaged with in the course of the novel.

Adam Piette makes an important and productive distinction between ‘public stories’ and ‘private stories’ during wartime. The former, he writes, ‘stressed vital resistance, public heroism, stoic good humour’, while the latter – which he also refers to as ‘the private imagination’ and defines as ‘the mind talking to itself in the form of essay, poem, novel, diary, letter’ – are ‘stories about broken minds, anaesthetised feelings, deep depression and loss of any sense of value’. It is Piette’s professed aim to let the private stories speak, so as to re-evaluate the public stories, to ‘show how a militarised culture does not merely incidentally invade the private imagination, but actually covets it as its own, wishes to transform it for its own uses, to make it its creature’.¹⁴⁷ *Post D* is an exception that proves Piette’s rule, sitting as it does on the fault line between public and private story. Strachey’s is a personal, deeply human and humanising account, but it would be wrong to say that it talks only ‘to itself’; the author had an audience in mind. Yet by occupying this fault line his text exemplifies Piette’s contention that, in wartime, the stories that a nation tells itself about itself are implicated in the private imagination, not only in Piette’s sense of a reflective literary output, but in the sense of an individual’s inner life.

Post D is a novel narrated in the third person, yet, in spite of this narrational distance, it is based on Strachey’s own experiences as an ARP warden and contains within the narrative much detailed information such as pay and working conditions, uniform and kit, the chain of command and other administrative details.¹⁴⁸ Much has been made of the fact that the text is based on the author’s own life. Writing in 1942, a year after the novel’s publication, John Lehmann points to *Post D* as one example of ‘reportage’ that lies ‘very close to the line that divides it from creative writing’.¹⁴⁹ (It is interesting that the text should, in Lehmann’s eyes, lie close to this line but not

¹⁴⁷ Adam Piette, *Imagination at War: British Fiction and Poetry 1939-1945* (London: Papermac, 1995), pp.1-5.

¹⁴⁸ Strachey is best known as a political theorist (he was a founder of the Left Book Club and self-identified as a communist before distancing himself from the Communist Party following the signing of the Nazi-Soviet pact) and a Labour politician. Just one other novel by Strachey was published, *The Frontiers* in 1952; the rest of his published writings were theoretical or polemical in nature. See Michael Newman, *John Strachey* (Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 1989).

¹⁴⁹ Lehmann, ‘The Armoured Writer – I’, p.156.

cross it.) More recent references have placed a similar emphasis, with Angus Calder calling the book ‘a moving, lightly fictionalised account of the author’s experiences as an air-raid warden in London’.¹⁵⁰ Juliet Gardiner too refers to the book as a ‘lightly’ fictionalised version of Strachey’s own experience, although unlike Lehmann she places it firmly in the category of ‘creative’ writing, referring to Ford, the text’s main character, as Strachey’s ‘alter ego in the novel’.¹⁵¹ Yet, whatever the precise calibration of the relationship between fact and fiction in the text, it is clear that *Post D* is a part of the ‘raw material’ that writers were storing away until less tumultuous times, as identified by Reeve and Mengham. The novel is, like Sansom’s stories, both fiction and documentary, an account of wartime experience, and Strachey states as much in the preface to the main text: ‘the description here attempted will be found to be, on the whole, representative of what many Air Raid Wardens, and other Civil Defence workers, saw and heard during this period’.¹⁵²

This claim to being ‘representative’ implies a position of neutrality in two senses. Firstly in terms of the text’s status as a ‘private story’: a piece of wartime literary writing with its genesis in personal experience. Bowen writes of her wartime short fiction, ‘They were sparks from experience – an experience not necessarily my own’, and that the stories ‘have an authority nothing to do with me’.¹⁵³ They are the private imagination at work, and not an individual imagination but a collective one, born of shared experience.¹⁵⁴ It is in this sense too that Strachey’s text can claim to be ‘representative’. Secondly, such an assertion of neutrality is significant in relation to the novel’s functioning as a public story, which is to say as a text with a message to convey about Britain’s wartime experience to an intended audience. It is significant because neutrality implies *truth*. By making a claim for the text as ‘representative’ Strachey states that what follows can be considered the facts of the matter: this is *what happened*.

The public stories that constituted British wartime propaganda were mobilised in the interests of ensuring that the war effort could be prosecuted

¹⁵⁰ Angus Calder, *The Myth of the Blitz* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1991), p.200.

¹⁵¹ Gardiner, *The Blitz*, p.98.

¹⁵² John Strachey, *Post D: Some Experiences of an Air Raid Warden* (London: Victor Gollancz, 1941), p.7. Subsequent references to this edition are given in parentheses within the main body of the text.

¹⁵³ ‘Postscript to the first U.S. edition of *The Demon Lover*’, p.95.

¹⁵⁴ Plain too has read Bowen’s wartime fiction through the lens of the ‘private imagination’ as defined by Piette. *Literature of the 1940s*, p.8.

effectively, and that, to this end, public support for the war was more or less maintained in the face of great suffering not only on the battlefields of Europe and elsewhere in the world, but in the nation's streets and houses. But it is the propaganda that was directed elsewhere, and specifically at the USA, that is an important context for the writing and publication of *Post D*. Gardiner asserts that 'the lesson Britain had learned by 1940 was that the war could not be won without US participation'. Britain's propaganda machine responded accordingly, exporting to the US 'an uncritical portrait of Britain's united and steadfast defiance, what would become the foundation of the post-war "myth of the blitz"'.¹⁵⁵ Calder argues that 'Strachey's rhetoric [in *Post D*] was certainly directed at US opinion'.¹⁵⁶ The rhetoric to which Calder specifically refers comes at the novel's close, in the final chapter entitled 'Make Haste, Hitler'. In it Strachey recalls how Londoners would bemoan the bombing of other British cities, commenting that it would be best for all the bombs to fall on the capital, as they were used to it now:

That was London's pride. That was her people's expression of their self-satisfaction. It was even partly true. No-one enjoyed the return of the raiders. But it was genuinely a relief to know that they were here rather than over some port or northern industrial centre (p.134).

This is London not only 'taking it', but relishing in it, an example of one of the public stories of 'stoic good humour' to which Piette refers, and Strachey's tone here seems tailor-made to encourage us to fall into the all-too-enticing trap of making the war 'the subject of nostalgia, glorification and fond reflection', something which Piette cautions against.¹⁵⁷

In its closing pages at least, *Post D* is resolutely a public story, published, as Calder asserts,

at a time when [US public opinion] had to be convinced that Britain could and would fight on though no decisive counter-offensive against the Germans was possible. But the British themselves had to be convinced that they could not only survive, but win. [...] People might very well doubt if they were capable of heroism. But most could feel that they shared in such invincible

¹⁵⁵ Gardiner, *The Blitz*, pp.174-175.

¹⁵⁶ Calder, *The Myth of the Blitz*, p.200.

¹⁵⁷ Piette, *Imagination at War*, pp.4-7.

“national traits” as fair-mindedness, kindness and “sense of humour”.¹⁵⁸

The text involves itself in the formation of a British national identity, specifically an identity adapted to the expediencies of the war, and an identity to be communicated to both the country itself and to the US. And, as Calder identifies, that national identity consists of a kind of collective good character rather than claims of individual acts of heroism in the face of adversity. Strachey writes as much in the first line of his preface: ‘The reader will be disappointed if he seeks for a record of heroic deeds or thrilling escapes in these pages’ (p.7). But his tone in this final chapter does imply a kind of shared heroism. Not only do Londoners relish and take pride in the opportunity to show their defiance under enemy attack, but, Strachey claims, they will be Hitler’s downfall:

If you leave them living it will be thought that there is something in the world that the detonations do not shatter. Make haste, or their quietness will echo round the world; their amusement will dissolve Empires; their ordinariness will become a flag; their kindness a rock, and their courage an avalanche (p.135).

‘Ordinariness’ will be victorious, and it is precisely the *ordinariness* of the city’s response to attack that is brought to the fore in Strachey’s account.

When *Post D* was published in the US it was titled *Digging for Mrs Miller*, the title of the third chapter in the UK edition. This episode within the novel recounts the progress and eventual failure of an attempt to save a small group of civilians trapped beneath the debris of their ruined homes. The episode is markedly anti-heroic. In fact, the pervasive sense is of a mixture of uncertainty and a rather numb tedium. The Senior Warden, we are told, ‘hesitated between various tasks’ (p.31). Ford and another warden spend time simply ‘wandering about a little’ on the fringes of the scene, before eventually, we are told, ‘they just waited about’ (p.32). The work of the rescue team ‘looked aimless’ (p.33), and even the climactic appearance of Mrs Miller’s corpse is lacking in drama: ‘She bled a little at the mouth, as her head sagged’ (p.41). It is through this sense of the mundanity of the Blitz experience that *Post D* sits along the fault line that divides public and private story. As I have suggested, it serves the public story because Strachey makes a virtue of it, making

¹⁵⁸ Calder, *The Myth of the Blitz*, p.200.

the mundane expressive of a quiet, ordinary, but resilient, heroism. But this emphasis on the war's 'ordinariness' also tells a private story in the novel, one that serves to unsettle the public story.

'What a domestic sort of war this is,' Strachey has Ford remark to a fellow warden. 'It happens in the kitchen, on landings, beside washing-baskets; it comes to us without us stirring a yard from our own doorsteps to meet it. Even its catastrophes are made terrible not by strangeness but by familiarity' (p.48). The real terror of life under the bombs is the manner in which the war insinuates itself into even the most mundane aspects of everyday life, and that it does so by insinuating itself into the *spaces* of everyday life. The war happens not on the battlefield alone but in everyday places. This is the characteristic experience of a population subjected to aerial bombardment. Bowen suggests that a possible response to such an invasion of domestic space is to be found in domestic space itself:

Literature of the Resistance has been steadily coming in from France. I wonder whether in a sense all wartime writing is not resistance writing? Personal life here, too, put up its own resistance to the annihilation that was threatening it – war. Everyone here, as is known, read more: and what was sought in books – old books, new books – was the communicative touch of personal life. To survive, not only physically but spiritually, was essential. People whose homes had been blown up went to infinite lengths to assemble bits of themselves – broken ornaments, odd shoes, torn scraps of the curtains that had hung in a room – from the wreckage.¹⁵⁹

Domestic space – and by extension the homely paraphernalia that fills it – is the site in which individual identity is located. Consequently such paraphernalia stands in as a surrogate for the domestic space that is damaged or destroyed. Moreover, the space and its contents are figured as an extension of the human body and are imbued with its characteristics, so people 'assemble bits of themselves' as if the domestic bomb-site, like a grievously wounded yet still living body, might be brought back to some semblance of its previous existence. And Bowen also makes a link between this emotional and psychological preservation through identification with the domestic space and literature. Reading and writing provide the individual with a tactic with which to 'resist' the invasion of domestic space; just as people 'assemble

¹⁵⁹ Bowen, 'Postscript to the first U.S. edition of *The Demon Lover*', p.97.

bits of themselves' so 'they assembled and checked themselves from stories and poems'.¹⁶⁰ This is a process comparable to the accumulation of 'raw material' identified by Reeve and Mengham, except that it does not quite involve the same documentary impulse. It is not driven by the desire to collect impressions that can be collated and digested sometime in the future, but rather it fulfils a desperate need in the present. It is an act of resistance, a fighting back (not so much against the enemy as against the *experience* of being at war itself) that is calculated to help preserve the individual in the midst of such an all-pervasive conflict.

The opening stanza of Stephen Spender's poem 'Air Raid' – written in January 1941 and thus very much in the thick of the Blitz – registers this dependence on the twin familiarities of literature and domestic space: 'In this room like a bowl of flowers filled with light / The family eyes look down on the white / Pages of a book, and the mild white ceiling, / Like a starched nurse, reflects a calm feeling'.¹⁶¹ A family finds solace through the communal act of reading within the domestic space, room and book operating in tandem to generate an almost medicinal sense of peace and quiet that is rooted in familiarity. Spender also, in common with Bowen, links the body and domestic space: 'In their complex surroundings, they act out the part / Of the flesh home of the human heart, / With limbs extending to chairs, tables, cups, / All the necessities and props'.¹⁶² The body is intimately connected to the contents of the space, as if to simply reach out and touch these objects is in itself a powerful act of self-preservation, and the very humanity of the home's occupants is rooted in their use of the domestic space: they 'act out' their identity through inhabiting the space. But, for all its apparent securities, the calm created by the recourse to the familiarities of domestic space is ultimately shattered by the bombs as 'an unreasoning fury impinges / From a different version of life, on their hearth'.¹⁶³ Not only does the war invade the home, but the hearth: the symbolic heart of the home, the source of warmth and material and psychological comfort. The horror lies in the conflict's capacity to envelop the familiar so completely.

Bowen and Spender make imagined links between domestic space and its occupants, between the body and architecture, and in so doing register the particular trauma of a conflict that insinuates itself into the home. They consider how the

¹⁶⁰ Bowen, 'Postscript to the first U.S. edition of *The Demon Lover*', p.97.

¹⁶¹ Stephen Spender, 'Air Raid', *Horizon*, vol. 3 (February, 1941), 93-94 (p.93).

¹⁶² *Ibid.*, p.94.

¹⁶³ *Ibid.*, p.94.

establishment of such a link might come to constitute a form of resistance, an act of self-preservation. In the course of *Post D* Strachey presents the literal realisation of this imagined link, of an intimate relationship between the human body and architectural space, in the aftermath of the raids. During one episode Ford is peering into a wreckage on which a rescue team is working when the narrative voice relates that

[t]here appeared to be nothing new there except one more greyish-yellow joist, which ended in a curiously grooved knob. After looking at it for some time Ford saw that it was a rubble-coated fist and an arm, bare to the elbow (p.39).

Ford mistakes the body for another scrap of the building materials that make up the majority of the ruins, and this initial failure to recognise the corpse for what it is recurs: upon discovering the body of a girl inside a ruined house Ford at first registers only ‘something dark lying at his feet’ (p.79). The organic, fleshy nature of the body is not immediately apparent, and, even when correctly identified, the bodies are often surprisingly devoid of gore. In one instance Strachey states that ‘[t]here was no blood or gross mutilation’ (p.40). In another Ford observes two rescue workers uncovering a body with its head ‘blown off’, but ‘it did not look particularly disgusting: merely incomprehensible’ (p.131). Elsewhere a body lies ‘in a pleasant attitude’ (p.79). It is as if these corpses have somehow lost their capacity to shock, to inspire a truly visceral, horrified response from the viewer. Instead they have absorbed the characteristics of – and in so doing have been absorbed into – the chaos of broken architecture that encases them: ‘the bodies had become part of the debris; they had become one constituent of the many constituents of the mound’ (p.40). They are ‘incomprehensible’ as bodies, as formerly living beings, because they have been amalgamated with the stuff of the ruins; they are no longer a physically distinct entity: ‘They had been crushed and pressed into the decomposed raw material of the five houses. Like the clay of the London sub-soil, their clay had lost its individual existence and become indissolubly a part of its environment’ (p.40). In the *Devastation* series Sutherland presents similar ruins from which the bodies are absent. Shackled by the diktats of wartime censorship, his images of the bombsites suggest not so much that suffering has no place in these scenes – he brings inorganic materials to life, using them to describe by proxy the human body in pain – but that

the suffering body can be readily removed from it. In *Post D* the suffering, dying or dead body is as much a part of the scene as any other material: it is fully implicated in the architecture of ruination; it is commonplace. The suffering body is terrible in its familiarity, something that Strachey registers when Ford accidentally treads on a corpse:

He knew instantly that it was a body and jumped off as if his foot had been stung. For the first time in the evening he felt horror. (Or did he? Was it mainly, at any rate, that he thought he ought to feel horror? Afterwards he was by no means sure.) (pp.87-88)

That dead bodies should litter the city, nestled amongst the debris of their homes, is horrific. Even more so is the fact that their presence is normalised to the extent that Ford does not know whether his horrified response is genuine or feigned. This is the terribleness of familiarity.

I have suggested that *Post D* has a public story to tell, intended at least in part as a bid to get the USA into the war. One passage of the novel in particular suggests that the horrors of life on the Home Front are being shown to this very end:

As he walked the streets, he could fancy that he heard the laboured breath of London. Her incoherent vastness was stretched beneath the night and the raiders. Then, and then again, the hammer stroke of a heavy bomb plunged into the body of the city. London stirred, quivered, and caught her breath as if wounded. She was wounded, again and again. Yet she was so gigantic that her wounds became insignificant, were rendered trivial, were dwarfed, till they seemed no more than cuts or sores upon the hide of some great, slow animal. [...] She lay, not passive, but growling back at the tormenting bombers from her hundred guns (p.43).

London, a vast body, suffers blow after blow, but not only does the city survive these injuries, it fights back. Far from crippling it, the bombs inflict merely ‘cuts’ and ‘sores’, doing little if any lasting damage. In fact, London is spurred on by its transient suffering. This passage very much chimes with the text’s role as, in Calder’s words, ‘unofficial propaganda’. It chimes too with Strachey’s wartime politics: a fervent patriotism that put him at odds with Communist Party members and, according to his biographer Michael Newman, was ‘a crucial factor in his break

with Communism'.¹⁶⁴ However, in the context of the rest of the novel, the sentiments of this passage come across as rather tasteless, and are not commensurate with a text that, for the most part, eschews the narrative of a bravely defiant population in favour of a straightforwardly unemotional presentation of the Home Front, suffering and all.

Taken as a whole, the text of the novel suggests that the impulse behind *Post D*'s representation of the injured body, and particularly the injured body within the illusory haven of the domestic space, is more nuanced than the label of 'unofficial propaganda' implies. The notion that Londoners experience the devastation wrought by the bombs with a sense of pride jars with the rather numbed responses to the destruction that Strachey describes. Although fragments of the text seem to suggest that London, in a flurry of fervent heroics, is 'taking it', much of the novel serves to emphasise the humdrum, the tedious, the unremarkable, even as it describes events and scenes that would seem radically out of place in the peacetime city. If Strachey's trumpeting of the city's 'pride' is unrepresentative then we must look to slightly earlier in the final passage in order to find something that is truer to the text's representation of London's response to the bombs. After describing a brief lull in the attacks and their subsequent recommencement Strachey writes, 'Several Londoners next day said things like this, "Well we're glad they're back. Better come here than go after Coventry and Southampton and Bristol. We're used to it. We know what it's like"' (p.134). Although perhaps not vastly different in meaning from the assertion of 'London's pride', which comes in the very next paragraph, the tone here is profoundly different. Strachey describes a form of resistance born not of heroism, but of familiarity. Thus here, in the space of just a few lines, are both the public and private stories of the novel: the public face of resistance – a people standing firm – and its private reality: a population that takes it because it is 'used to it'. (The two stories, although different in content, can appear, on the surface at least, strikingly

¹⁶⁴ Newman, *John Strachey*, p.81. There is, interestingly, a different kind of public story also at work in the text, one that looks beyond the present wartime moment. In an extended and slightly clunky passage, in which Strachey's inclination towards polemic shines through, the author has Ford muse upon the Civil Defence Services as a model for post-war reconstruction, asking 'if this curious Corps did not perhaps contain the germ of a form of organisation which might be destined to play a permanent part in the life of the community', and 'was there not here the hint of something which suggested a radically improved method of dealing with that section of the population which profit-making private enterprise now habitually refused to employ?' (p.127) This societal reconstruction, Strachey suggests, is both a spur to the war effort and one of its aims: 'If the queue at the Labour Exchange, the U.A.B interview and the re-imposition of the Means Test, seemed to the people of Britain to be the only prospect held out to them by victory, then there would be no victory' (p.129).

similar.) *Post D* is both a record and an affirmation of this private reality, and it is a record that unsettles the public story of stoic heroism under the bombs even as it expresses some of its sentiments.

The ordinariness, the mundanity, the domesticity of the wartime experience that the novel describes is its chiefest horror, but it is also a kind of mitigation of it. Strachey internalises the horror in the course of *Post D*. His measured, often almost journalistic style – Gardiner calls it ‘a detached, probing account’¹⁶⁵ – registers the manner in which the Blitz made terrible violence a fact of ordinary, everyday experience. This stylistic normalisation of the horror – a normalisation encoded in the form of its representation – allows the narrative voice to echo the sense of numb mundanity that Strachey finds in the scenes that he describes, so that the novel both enacts and describes London’s mode of resistance. The image of broken bodies intimately entwined with broken architectures is both representative of the Blitz experience, a transcription of an observed reality, and a powerful expression of the war’s incursion into ordinary lives through its invasion of familiar, homely spaces. It is an image that describes a radically altered relationship between Londoners and their city, as the bombs constructed new, deadly architectures, and that is indicative of a Blitz literature engaged in writing architecture as a visceral experience.

Bowen’s wartime fiction, as her postscript to *The Demon Lover* attests, is interested in another facet of the visceral experience of architecture – namely the psychological response to that experience. Although this is something on which the other texts I have considered here touch – Sansom is interested in the imagination and how it responds to the experience, while Strachey gestures towards a kind of psychological numbness – Bowen’s writing focuses on it with a particular intensity. What is especially striking about Bowen’s accounts of the war is their sheer domesticity. More often than not we find ourselves in homes or other everyday spaces and situations – we are not, in spite of Bowen’s own personal experiences as an ARP Warden, amidst the chaos of the blitzed streets with Sansom and Strachey. Rather the literal, physical disturbances caused by exploding bombs and collapsing buildings emerge as a tacit presence in Bowen’s writing, in the form of psychological disturbances. Her story ‘The Happy Autumn Fields’ will serve here as an example of this strategy at work. It has already been noted, via Mengham’s

¹⁶⁵ Gardiner, *The Blitz*, p.98.

analysis, that there emerges in the fiction of both Sansom and Bowen ‘the logic of dream or nightmare’, and that this movement away from realism recognises that the form is not up to the task of containing wartime experience. In ‘The Happy Autumn Fields’ a dream sequence becomes an articulation of the mental distress experienced by Bowen’s protagonist. It is through this ‘dream logic’ that Bowen explores and unpacks the particular quality of psychological disturbances engendered by the falling bombs, and in particular by their intrusion, both literally and metaphorically, into the domestic space.

‘The Happy Autumn Fields’ begins in the nineteenth century and is narrated from the perspective of Sarah (but in the third person) as she makes up part of a ‘family walking party’ in the countryside.¹⁶⁶ Some way into the story comes a spatial and temporal shift: the narrative now centres on Mary, who we find in her flat, which has been partially ruined in an air raid. It becomes apparent that Sarah’s story has been dreamed by Mary. As Mary falls asleep for a second time Sarah’s narrative emerges once again, only to be violently interrupted by an explosion that shakes Mary’s flat – a rare instance of the literal intervention of war violence in Bowen’s writing. Introducing Sansom’s stories Bowen writes of the ‘extraordinary extension of the moment’ in his writing, and I have suggested that it is this extension that allows Sansom to examine in meticulous detail the moment that is being described. In ‘The Happy Autumn Fields’ Bowen too extends a single moment: the moment of Mary’s psychological distress at the partial destruction of her home. But whereas Sansom effects an expansion of the moment through temporal deceleration, Bowen uses narrative displacement.

Writing in a 1950 essay entitled ‘The Bend Back’ Bowen states, ‘Contemporary writing retreats from the present-day’, before qualifying her statement: ‘Nostalgia is not a literary concoction, it is a prevailing mood – to which, it may be, writers yield too much’. What follows is a consideration of the changing status of ‘the present’ in the popular imaginary over the course of the twentieth century, as Bowen charts a shift from the Edwardian enthusiasm for the new century – ‘a flush of zest for its progress, its immunity from the older ills, its delights, its ameliorations and its discoveries’ – to the ‘decline of love for the present’ that came

¹⁶⁶ Elizabeth Bowen, ‘The Happy Autumn Fields’, in *Elizabeth Bowen: Collected Stories* (London: Vintage, 1999), pp.671-685 (p.671). Subsequent references to this edition are given in parentheses within the main body of the text. Originally published in the *Cornhill*, November 1944.

with the outbreak of war in 1914. Following the First World War there came about a 'literature of contemporary sensation', and Bowen emphasises, significantly, that this was 'a literature of sensation only – cerebrally brilliant, but skin-deep, ultimately bodiless in that it lacked soul'. Now, in that post-war moment out of which Bowen writes the article, 'writers should re-instate the idea of life as liveable, lovable'. As things stand at present, Bowen suggests, writers are seeking to fulfil this role 'only by recourse to life in the past', a tendency which she describes as a 'malady'.¹⁶⁷ 'The Happy Autumn Fields' is therefore written out of a moment of, as Bowen sees it, transition between a literature that is 'of contemporary sensation' and a literature that looks to the past in search of a restorative vitality. Moreover, the story Bowen tells provides a model of such a search, as well as locating the genesis of the collective psychological need for retrospection in the harrowing experiences of war through the character of Mary, who engages in what Bowen refers to in 'The Bend Back' as 'factitious memory': an instance in which 'we are made to seem to remember that which we have not actually known'. Yet, whereas in her essay Bowen suggests that there is a tendency for writers to reconstruct the past as 'a golden climate',¹⁶⁸ the past that Mary accesses through dream functions more as a corollary for her mental distress in the present moment.

Bowen, through the character of Travis, identifies Mary's intense dreaming as a psychological response to the bombing of her home. When she awakes for the first time he admonishes her for choosing to remain in her flat, telling her: 'In your normal senses you'd never attempt to stay here. [...] [I]t was almost frightening, when I looked in just now, to see the way you were sleeping – you've shut up shop'. He continues: 'You don't like it here. Your self doesn't like it. Your will keeps driving your self, but it can't be driven the whole way – it makes its own get-out: sleep' (p.676). In spite of her determination to remain she cannot suppress the mental disturbance engendered by the bombs. Denied the reassurance of flight from a place of danger, her mind responds by shutting itself off from the present and retreating into an imagined past. This 'past' has a source, which Travis identifies: a bundle of 'illegible letters, diaries, yellow photographs' (p.677). The fact that her dream – which is more like a waking hallucination in its vivid intensity – is given such a palpable, physical source serves to pathologise her experience. Unlike in Bowen's

¹⁶⁷ Elizabeth Bowen, 'The Bend Back', in *The Mulberry Tree*, pp.54-60 (pp.54-55 & 59).

¹⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, pp.56-57.

most famous description of wartime psychological distress, 'The Demon Lover', here a sense of the experience being in any way ghostly or fantastic is undercut by the discovery of the source material for Mary's dream. Whereas in 'The Demon Lover' Mrs Drover's guilt manifests itself physically, is described as something external that comes to bear her away, here Mary uses a set of pre-existing characters and situations to generate a 'past'. And, however artificial, this 'past' is intoxicatingly powerful; it becomes the lens through which she views and understands her present:

The unreality of this room and of Travis's presence preyed on her as figments of dreams that one knows to be dreams can do. This environment's being in semi-ruin struck her less than its being some sort of device or trap; and she rejoiced, if anything, in its decrepitude. As for Travis, he had his own part in the conspiracy to keep her from the beloved two. She felt he began to feel he was now unmeaning. She was struggling not to condemn him, scorn him for his ignorance of Henrietta, Eugene, her loss. His possessive angry fondness was part, of course, of the story of him and Mary, which like a book once read she remembered clearly but with indifference. Frantic at being delayed here, while the moment awaited her in the cornfield, she all but afforded a smile at the grotesquerie of being saddled with Mary's body and lover (p.677).

The relationship between Mary's reality and her dream world has been inverted; the space that has generated her psychological distress and precipitated her flight from reality – namely the ruined domestic space – has taken on the qualities of the dream world to which she has fled. The flat feels to Mary like a 'device or trap'; it is the sheer materiality of the space – she is woken by the house's rocking, by falling chunks of ceiling, by the physical impact of the bomb (p.683) – that keeps her from her dream world, that keeps her trapped in her present reality. Only the destruction of the flat, and with it Mary's death, would permit her to return to it: 'The one way back to the fields was barred by Mary's surviving the fall of ceiling' (p.683). But the flat is also a trap in a far more literal sense: Mary is narrowly missed by the collapsing ceiling, nearly trapped inside her flat and killed by that same event which wrenches her from the dream world. It is, of course, the building surrounding her which presents a physical danger, and consequently it is also a threat to the imagined past into which she has escaped as a psychological response to that danger. Yet whereas Mary labels the flat a 'device or trap' these are actually qualities we might

more readily associate with Sarah's narrative: a 'device' because it seems to provide for Mary a form of escape, and a 'trap' because it threatens to, and indeed in this moment does, envelop her. Such is her detachment from the present moment that everything in it – the room, Travis, her own body even – is to her devoid of meaning.

Yet, although the 'past' comes to feel more real for Mary than her precarious, distressing present, she is unable to find in it solace from her mental anguish. At the centre of Mary's dream, of Sarah's narrative, is a failure to speak. Henrietta, in referring to the approach of Fitzgeorge and Eugene across the field, names only the former: 'Her way of not speaking the *other* name had a hundred meanings; she drove them all in by the way she did not look at Sarah's face' (p.674, original emphasis). Later Sarah and Eugene find themselves separated from the rest of the party. Walking side-by-side but not speaking they gradually approach the others, knowing that when they do catch up communication will become impossible, but unable still in that moment to communicate: 'Speak the only possible word! Say – oh, say what? Oh, the word is lost!' (p.675). In the first instance there is a surfeit of meaning to which Henrietta's failure to speak alludes, whereas in the second instance meaning is lost precisely because it is *not* spoken, because it *cannot* be spoken. At the close of the story Travis tells Mary something he has gleaned from his reading of the letters: namely that an unnamed 'friend of their youth [...] was thrown from his horse and killed' one autumn day whilst returning from a visit to the family's home, the implication being that the unnamed youth was Eugene and that he was returning home from the very scene that has just unfolded in Mary's dream (pp.684-685). This revelation is a final refusal of resolution: that which Sarah could not say to Eugene can now never be spoken; the letter can offer no clue as to 'what made the horse shy in those empty fields' (p.685); Eugene himself remains unsayable, his name absent from the letter. Domestic space is the repository of an individual's identity, and while it remains whole it might offer a kind of resistance against psychological fragmentation, until the space itself is fragmented. People looked to stories for, in Bowen's words 'the communicative touch of personal life', but Sarah's narrative grants Mary only a fleeting consolation. That dream world, which seemed to offer through full immersion in the domestic life and space of another the possibility of psychic escape, in truth offers just more meaningless violence.

Ruin as (Re)Discovery: Writing a New Architecture

Strachey and Bowen activate architecture in their writing as a strategic response to the conditions – material, psychological, political – of the Blitz. In this final section I will consider the ways in which texts, both literary and architectural, activate architectural space in such a way as to produce a new kind of relationship between architecture and user, building and writer – one that has been generated by the conditions of the Blitz. In so doing I want first to return to the idea of documentation.

The existence of the War Damage Survey of the Architects' Department of the London County Council points to a comparable documentary impulse within architectural as within literary circles: a desire to keep an account of violent changes to the city, albeit a dryly statistical one that seems far removed from the writing of fiction. In spite of the drastic formal difference between a map coloured to indicate bomb damage and a piece of writing, planning and memorialisation are intertwined here just as they are for writers; they are part of the same impulse. As *The War History of the Architect's Department* says of the Survey, 'the work specifically included buildings of architectural and historical interest', as well as aiding in the 'facilitation of post-war reconstruction'.¹⁶⁹ But if the Survey, with its blanket, impersonal approach to keeping account of the erasure of the city's architecture, lacked something of fiction's capacity to capture subjective experience, then two other projects concerned with the fate of architecture and architects under the bombs go some way to bridging this gap. One is *The War History of the Architect's Department*, and another is a documentary project undertaken by J.M. Richards.

The '[f]irst instalment of a survey of bomb damage to buildings of architectural importance' appeared in July 1941 as part of the *Destruction and Reconstruction* special issue of *The Architectural Review*, and continued to be a regular feature of the publication throughout the Blitz. (It was, by and large, the City churches that Richards felt to be architecturally 'important'.) In introducing this initial instalment of the feature Richards places emphasis on the importance of looking forward to post-war reconstruction: 'damage by bombing has served the invaluable purpose of directing public attention to the *possibilities* of replanning'.¹⁷⁰

¹⁶⁹ *The War History of the Architect's Department*, p.86.

¹⁷⁰ Editorial, 'First instalment of a survey of bomb damage to buildings of architectural importance', *The Architectural Review*, vol. 90 (July, 1941), 6.

But in his foreword to *The Bombed Buildings of Britain*, a book that collected together details of ‘architectural casualties’ – and which was, like the original features in the *Review*, illustrated with photographs and notations by John Summerson – there is a subtle shift in Richards’s emphasis. In this text, dated March 1942, he states that the book is intended ‘to provide an obituary notice and a pictorial record’.¹⁷¹ Richards’s professed aim is to capture a moment, to memorialise a vanishing history. This is not the relentless forward thinking of the planning and reconstruction narrative, but a more reflective kind of documentary process through which Richards addresses the experience of living with ruination. The question he poses is how should one *see* the ruins? And the answer he offers is ‘one must consider each ruin as an architectural phenomenon in its own right’ (p.7). This new way of seeing the ruins insists that ‘ruined buildings [are] to be looked at for the sake of what they are at the moment’, that they have ‘an architectural vitality of their own’ (p.7). The spaces that Richards records may be ruined, but they are not *dead*. They are very much active and continue to impact upon – to have agency over – those that occupy them, except that now, rather than that agency being the result of the combination of a building’s formal composition and its intended function, it is generated by its ruination: by a ruin’s capacity to be ‘an embodiment of historical experience’ (p.7). In documenting such spaces Richards’s project recognises that architecture has become a kind of visceral experience, and that ruination is both a facet and a symbol of that experience. Moreover, the driving impulse behind Richards’s particular documentation of the city – his insistence that London’s ruination calls for a new way of seeing architectural spaces, which is really a new way of *understanding* and *describing* those spaces – links his project to writers’ and artists’ contemporaneous representations of the newly-formed ruins.

Mark Rawlinson, writing in reference to Richards’s project but using a phrase that is equally apt to describe a great deal of artistic representations of the bombsites, states that ‘ruin is not loss but rediscovery’.¹⁷² Ruination is revelatory because it forces, quite literally, a *new way of seeing* on the viewer by stripping away facades and exposing that which was previously hidden within and beneath the walls of

¹⁷¹ J.M. Richards, ‘Foreword to the First Edition’, in *The Bombed Buildings of Britain: Second Edition Recording the Architectural Casualties Suffered During the Whole Period of Air Bombardment, 1940-45*, ed. by J.M. Richards (London: The Architectural Press, 1947), pp.7-8 (p.7). Subsequent references to this edition are given in parentheses within the main body of the text. First edition published 1942.

¹⁷² Rawlinson, *British Writing of the Second World War*, p.86.

damaged buildings, or by doing the contrary: gutting a building so that it stands as an empty shell. This sense of a literal revelation is, I will show, one recurring trope. In *Post D* Strachey gestures towards another significant trope that is tied up with this first, as he evocatively encapsulates a sense of a terrible and violent process that is not only destructive but *transformative* too in his description of a freshly made ruin as ‘this construction of destruction, this deposit of the blast’ (p.90). Ruination is not the negation of built space, but its reconfiguration; it recreates the city using as its ‘raw materials’, in Richards’s words, ‘the scarified surfaces of blasted walls, the chalky substance of calcined masonry, the surprising sagging contours of once rigid girders and the clear sienna colouring of burnt-out brick buildings’.¹⁷³

Sutherland’s *Devastation, 1941: An East End Street* (1941, Figure 4) shows such a reconfiguration. Here Sutherland positions his viewer at one end of the street, as if looking down it. The forms in the immediate foreground and to the sides of the



Figure 4, Devastation, 1941: An East End Street

picture are indistinct – sketchy outlines, the suggestion of crumbled masonry – and at times they fade completely into blackness. In the centre of the image, receding into the distance, stand the

street’s terraced houses with only their facades intact, these austere frontages standing in stark contrast to the chaos that lurks behind them. With their former interiors now completely obliterated the houses have taken on the air of fakes: an eerily still stage or film set. This image, Blitzed street as ‘set’, recurs in representations of the bombsites, among them a description by Bowen, in ‘London, 1940’, of her home – located on the cusp of Regent’s Park – and its surroundings, one that, although describing a distinctly grander neighbourhood than the subject of Sutherland’s picture, nevertheless echoes the artist’s image. Bowen writes, ‘Around three sides of the Park, the Regency terraces look like scenery in an empty theatre’,

¹⁷³ Richards, *The Bombed Buildings of Britain*, p.8.

and ‘the Nash pillars look as brittle as sugar’, but they remain intact, hiding, as in Sutherland’s image, the decimation of the ‘gutted’ domestic spaces behind them.¹⁷⁴ Sansom too draws on this image in describing a street transformed by firelight in ‘The Wall’: ‘certainly the ubiquitous fire-glow made an orange stage-set of the streets’ (p.167). This trope of the now vanished interior that leaves behind only a skeletal exterior is familiar from photographic images of Blitz bombsites, and such an architecture is the subject of Leonard Rosoman’s painting *Cheapside* (1940, Figure 5). Here the skeleton of a building, thrown into relief by the flames that rage behind it, dominates the composition, stretching from one side of the canvas to the other. The building’s interior has ceased to exist, replaced by a violent conflagration



Figure 5, *Cheapside*

that threatens to overwhelm the tiny figures of the firemen fighting it. Piper’s ‘The Architecture of Destruction’ is littered with similarly hollowed-out buildings: a ruined cathedral is ‘a series of gaunt, red-grey facades’, only ‘the shell of the

walls’ remain; in a church the still standing walls form ‘an enormous lidless stone box’; the tower of another church has become ‘an enormous hollow chimney’.¹⁷⁵

In the above examples a new kind of architecture is created out of the devastation, but it is a limited architecture. The set-like appearance of the damaged buildings is the result of a violent hollowing-out process; shorn of function, rendered insubstantial, these spaces now merely suggest the buildings that they once were. The space has been reconfigured, but in the process has reached a kind of stasis: inactive as pieces of stage scenery, these spaces have become unusable, and can only

¹⁷⁴ Bowen, ‘London, 1940’, p.24.

¹⁷⁵ Piper, ‘The Architecture of Destruction’, pp.25-26.

gesture towards their own brokenness. But in other instances spaces are activated in new ways by the damage they suffer, permitting previously impossible forms of engagement with that architecture, and lending them the kind of ‘vitality’, the possibility of a new kind of experience, that Richards describes. It is this sense of possibility that Bowen expresses in the opening paragraph of her short story ‘In the Square’. Here the residential area of the title has been radically reordered, so that ‘[t]he sun, now too low to enter normally, was able to enter brilliantly at a point where three of the houses had been bombed away’. The interiors of these houses are altered by a sunlight that has never before touched them: ‘exposed wallpapers were exaggerated into viridians, yellows and corals that they had probably never been’.¹⁷⁶ The play of light permitted by the architectural abnormalities of these ruins creates a pleasing spectacle in spite of the death and destruction it denotes, and this sense of ruins as the site of a newly possible aesthetic experience is echoed in Graham Greene’s essay ‘At Home’:

I think of [a house] in Woburn Square neatly sliced in half. With its sideways exposure it looked like a Swiss chalet: there were a pair of skiing sticks hanging in the attic, and in another room a grand piano cocked one leg over the abyss. [...] In the bathroom the geyser looked odd and twisted seen from the wrong side, and the kitchen impossibly crowded with furniture until one realised one had been given a kind of mouse-eye view from behind the stove and the dresser – all the space where people used to move about with toast and tea-pots was out of sight.¹⁷⁷

Greene imagines at first that he is viewing the revealed interior from an impossible angle, before realising that this is indeed the case – or rather that the angle is only made possible by the removal of half of the building. The building’s ruination has allowed a new kind of visual access; it has created a new way of experiencing that architecture.

Sutherland too, in the course of his *Devastation* series, is concerned with the new kinds of spaces, and the new ways of seeing, that are brought about through ruination. In writing of his time spent painting *in situ* he describes how

¹⁷⁶ Elizabeth Bowen, ‘In the Square’, in *Elizabeth Bowen: Collected Stories*, pp.609-615 (p. 609).

¹⁷⁷ Graham Greene, ‘At Home’, in *Collected Essays* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1977), pp.333-336 (p.333).

gradually it was borne on me amid all this destruction how singularly one shape would impinge on another. A lift-shaft, for instance, the only thing left from what had obviously been a very tall building: in the way it had fallen it was like a wounded animal. It wasn't that these forms *looked* like animals, but their movements were animal movements [original emphasis].¹⁷⁸

The painting to which Sutherland refers here is possibly *Devastation, City 1941: Fallen Lift Shaft* (1941), which depicts crumpled, broken machinery, strewn across the paper like some sort of creature crouching amongst the debris. It is, as Sutherland suggests, the *attitude* of the shape – fearful, withdrawn – that is animalistic, and a sense of movement within the picture is similarly important in another work from this series entitled *Devastation in the City: Twisted Girders Against a Background of Fire* (1941). Here the girders of the title are simultaneously suggestive of organic matter – leaves of grass or even tentacles – and of the flames against which they stand. This is a damaged architecture that is writhing in concert with the fires burning within and around it, and it is in this sense of a common movement that the mingling of forms which Sutherland describes in the bombsites occur in his pictures.



Figure 6, Devastation 1941: East End, Wrecked Public House

This mingling, as shapes ‘impinge’ upon one another, is transformative: it creates new forms out of broken spaces. It is this process that Sutherland records in *Devastation 1941: East End, Wrecked Public House* (1941, Figure 6). The building has crumbled and is skeletal in parts, but it reaches skywards nonetheless. A ray of light strikes it at its peak, and the building looks ecclesiastical in the way it tapers off to a fine point. This pub, through its sudden and violent ruination, has formed a new, unplanned, unpredictable architecture.

Richards raises the possibility of engaging in a serious aesthetic appreciation

¹⁷⁸ Letter to Edwin Mullins originally printed in *The Sunday Telegraph Magazine*, 10th September 1971, pp.27-28, in Hammer, *Graham Sutherland*, pp.102-105 (p.102).

of the ruins, of recognising their ‘architectural vitality’ and ‘their beauty’, and valuing them for it (p.7). Such an appreciation is a way to take advantage of, and to come to terms with, the altered state of the fabric of Britain’s cities – of the new architectures, and the new ways of experiencing architectural space, that the Blitz blasted into being. As I have suggested, Richards’s is an endeavour that chimes with the contemporaneous work of literary writers and painters, inasmuch as it places an emphasis on architecture as experience. This is an architecture that exists in dynamic relation to the viewer; it excites a response, and not in spite of its brokenness, but because of it. The ruins have agency, they are, as Richards argues and Sutherland shows, living. Sansom and Rosoman, in prose and paint respectively, also represent an architecture that is ‘alive’ – perilously so. They describe a relationship to the architecture that is literally dynamic: the space is subject to continuous change; the buildings are liable to collapse or to be swallowed whole by the flames at any moment. This ‘animation’ of the architecture in Sansom’s writing is something that Rawlinson has already discussed, but I want to end by focussing on one specific aspect of this animation. Rawlinson refers to the ‘transfiguring gaze’ of Sansom’s narrator in ‘The Wall’ as he describes the progress of the flames across the building.¹⁷⁹ The fire seems to revitalise the building even as it destroys it, imbuing it with a sense of energy and movement. The dynamism of this description, Rawlinson argues, allows Sansom to register the pregnancy of that moment just prior to the building’s collapse: the possibility of that collapse is contained within the very architecture itself.¹⁸⁰ I want to think about the ‘transfiguring gaze’ of Sansom’s narrator in relation to the aestheticising project in which Richards engages, and to the radically new experiences of architecture described by Bowen and Greene.

Richards, along with Bowen and Greene, is concerned with the ruins themselves. Although he understands the ruins to be evocative of the violent events that created them, he is not directly concerned with those events. Sansom and Rosoman, on account of their particular perspective as firemen, very much are. Consequently theirs is not the straightforward aestheticisation in which Richards engages. There is too much peril, too much horror, to permit the necessary degree of

¹⁷⁹ Rawlinson, *British Writing of the Second World War*, p.97.

¹⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, p.97.

detachment.¹⁸¹ Their representations are born of being present in that moment of ruination, without the leisure to step back from it. Yet, despite their proximity to such a violent process, there is in the work of both artist and writer the sense that the fires are, to echo Strachey, not merely destructive but also *constructive*, and that that which they construct is awesome, wonderful, even beautiful. Referring to an article by Victor MacClure entitled ‘London’s Burning! – Baptism of Fire’, Piette writes, ‘What was exhilarating about the vision of the Blitz from vantage points within and around the blitzed areas was that the city was *being* reconstructed by the fires’ (original emphasis).¹⁸² It is this phenomenon that Sansom and Rosoman describe, and Piette’s emphasis on ‘being’ – on the *presentness* of that ruination that is also a reconstruction – is useful. The bombs have instituted yet another kind of architecture, one even more fleeting than the material ruins of buildings that lie awaiting salvage and reconstruction – a fiery architecture lasting only as long as the flames can burn.

In both ‘The Wall’ and ‘Fireman Flower’ Sansom’s descriptions of this novel, flaming architecture are the written corollary of Rosoman’s *Cheapside*. As already noted, buildings are animated, they are ‘alive with red fire’ (‘The Wall’, p.170). But at work also is a tension between, on the one hand, the solidity and stasis of the fabric of the buildings, and on the other the movement, the fluidity of the flames. It is out of this tension that the sense of a self-contradictory process that is simultaneously destructive *and* constructive arises. Thus in ‘The Wall’

like the lighted carriages of a night express, there appeared alternating rectangles of black and red that emphasised vividly the extreme symmetry of the window spacing: each oblong window shape posed as a vermillion panel set in perfect order upon the dark face of the wall

while, ‘with strong contrasts of black and red, the blazing windows stood to attention in strict formation’, and ‘[o]range-red colour seemed to *bulge* from the black frame-

¹⁸¹ In a diary entry dated 29th October 1940 Sansom describes the ‘coppery-red’ colour of the endlessly burning fires: ‘It is a live colour, the colour of a living element, and so it cannot grow dim and neutral with familiarity. [...] Because, being a fireman, I am naturally attached to the most fired districts, it is impossible to escape this colour. From a distance, serving its part in the blitz panorama, it can be beautiful. But not when it is closely with you for twelve hours at a stretch’. ‘A Fireman’s Journal’, p.134.

¹⁸² Piette, *Imagination at War*, p.68.

work, assumed tactile values, like boiling jelly that expanded inside a thick black squared grill' (p.170, original emphasis). The fire, in the very process of destroying the building, emphasises its architectonic qualities. In 'The Wall' as in *Cheapside* the solidity of the building's shape is only enhanced by the confusion of fire and smoke that surrounds it, with Sansom's narrator finding that the insubstantiality of the flames serves to emphasise the architecture's 'extreme symmetry', its proportion, its design, its solidity as a constructed object. And if *Cheapside* contains this contrast then *A House Collapsing on Two Firemen, Shoe Lane, London EC4* captures the fleeting nature of the forms and spaces that are violently created: a construction of destruction that literally hangs in the air; a momentary architecture. Sansom too describes an architecture in flux in 'Fireman Flower':

fiercely twisting sheets of flame would roll out from behind a buttress, flap and bite at the night air, then recoil as suddenly as they had advanced, disappearing conclusively, curling back suddenly like the tongue of a butterfly. [...] Flames whose shape could not be fixed by the eye fanned out suddenly from nowhere with a combustible hiss of great power.¹⁸³

By turns hidden and then revealed by the flames that are consuming it, the building is transfigured by fire. It is as if, for a moment, the fire does not feed off of the building, but exists with it in a kind of harmonious, symbiotic relationship, constructing a new architecture even as it destroys another.

¹⁸³ William Sansom, 'Fireman Flower', in *Fireman Flower*, 3rd edn. (London: The Hogarth Press, 1966), pp.196-255 (p.201).

3. 'The Cities Which Men Make Reflect Their Souls': Planning, Building, Writing, 1944-1955

In 1945 and 1946 respectively, agricultural economist Charles Stewart Orwin and Elizabeth Bowen both appropriated Washington Irving's famously somnolent character Rip Van Winkle as a vehicle for their opinions on the question of post-war reconstruction. Transporting the character to a strange but not so distant future, Bowen uses Van Winkle to express her unease at the imagined consequences of reconstruction. Orwin's Van Winkle falls asleep in 1940s Britain – when the war's outcome was far too uncertain for the issue of reconstruction to have been raised with any great seriousness or specificity – and awakes 'a generation later, after the nation, freed from its preoccupation with war, had set itself to solve some of the problems, industrial and social, of the countryside'.¹⁸⁴

Orwin's focus, as this and his book's title, *Problems of the Countryside*, will suggest, is reconstruction as it pertains to the rural environment, and in the course of his book Orwin champions new development in country towns, hoping 'that they signalled the gradual extension of urban standards of living to the deeper countryside'.¹⁸⁵ More broadly, this is an expression of faith in the capacity of contemporary planning and building to improve the lot of the general population, urban as well as rural. Returning to 'the village of his youth' Van Winkle sees that in the place of his old school is 'a new and larger building', and, he notes, 'it was obvious that the admission of light and air was an important part of the design'. He observes too 'some sort of housing development' built in addition to the existing domestic architecture, but finds that

there was no suggestion about the place of a divided community, of an old village and a new housing estate. On the contrary, Rip Van Winkle had an impression of a virile, well-knit society, as though there had been a blood transfusion into the old body corporate, which had caused it to expand and to develop, both physically and mentally. There was a vigour and activity about the place which it had never suggested as he remembered it, and he found it good.¹⁸⁶

¹⁸⁴ C.S. Orwin, *Problems of the Countryside* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1945), p.105.

¹⁸⁵ Gordon E. Cherry and Alan Rogers, *Rural Change and Planning: England and Wales in the Twentieth Century* (London: E & FN Spon, 1996), p.206.

¹⁸⁶ Orwin, *Problems of the Countryside*, pp.107-109.

Van Winkle's appreciative response to the village's new additions encapsulates two key aspirations associated with post-war reconstruction in the towns and cities at the time Orwin and Bowen were writing.

First of these is the hope that post-war architecture, more than simply putting the country back together as it was before the bombs came, would furnish the population with much improved, healthier living conditions. The RIBA (Royal Institute of British Architects) plan, published in 1943, makes this an explicit aim. A photograph of a row of Victorian terraced houses, with mothers chatting and children playing in the street, is captioned:

The East End of London. Good, solid, sanitary building, perhaps, and a real improvement on existing standards at the time it was built. By no means the worst example to be found. But it is no sort of a place for people to live in, particularly when it is surrounded with miles of similar streets and buildings. It is little better than an open-air prison, and besides being unhealthy, thwarts the opportunity for a full and happy life.¹⁸⁷

The emphasis here is on breaking up the perceived monotony of the city as it stands, and, through so doing, reconnecting city-dwellers with the world beyond the walls and streets within which they live. Reconstruction would reconfigure the lives of the people for the better.

Secondly it was hoped that the fruits of reconstruction would co-exist with the built environment as it already was – that old and new buildings might be in harmony with one another – and that this architectural cohesion might play a role in creating a more cohesive society. The tendency to link the two is apparent in J.H. Forshaw and Patrick Abercrombie's *County of London Plan*. The authors praise various parts of London – Hampstead and Chelsea among them – as being exemplary and in little need of attention from planners. But these areas, they suggest, should not be considered a high-water mark so much as an indication 'that every residential part of London might be equally attractive'. Moreover, they express the hope that after the war there should be greater equality of income, and assert that

¹⁸⁷ RIBA, *Rebuilding Britain* (London: Lund Humphries, 1943), p.16. Published to accompany the RIBA exhibition *Rebuilding Britain* at the National Gallery (February 1943).

‘this should be reflected in the Plan, which provides for a greater mingling of the different groups of London’s society’.¹⁸⁸

Bowen’s ‘Gone Away’ expresses entirely different sentiments. This Rip Van Winkle also awakes to find that the village he knows has been radically altered, but whereas Orwin’s future projection merely introduces what he sees as the best of contemporary architectural practice into a rural environment, Bowen invents a dystopia. In the course of the short story Van Winkle is given a tour of the village by his friend the vicar, and what he encounters there is described by the narrative voice with a growing sense of horror. Van Winkle finds the ‘rich boundless laxity’ of the countryside replaced by a ‘picture postcard’ scene containing all the constituent elements of a stereotypical English village, including ‘[a] pub with a Lion sign’ a village green and ‘a row of creeper-draped cottages’. Eventually he finds that much of this is indeed scenery, with ‘the greater part of the buildings being facades only, supported by struts behind’. Various of the ‘village accessories’ are displayed alongside ‘informative labels’, and the ducks in the pond are stuffed.¹⁸⁹ The village is now a ‘Reserve’ – a visitor attraction ‘demarcated by high wire fencing’ – and is ‘situated at the centre of Brighterville’, the product of over-zealous town planning: its ‘model avenues’ organised in ‘spoke formation’ recall Ebenezer Howard’s garden-city designs, its ‘fountains not so much played as functioned’ (p.761), and the story closes with a rather clunky metaphor for the guiding hand of the planner: the image of ‘a cloud the size of a man’s hand’ hovering overhead (p.766). Beyond the limits of the Reserve, the dehumanising architecture is reminiscent of the hive world in Forster’s ‘The Machine Stops’:

Cased in glass and whiteness, whose effect was the same whether one stood nominally indoors or out, stupefied by the now turgid beams of the latening sun, or belted across the eyes by hard, toneless shadow, he began, he thought, to feel his own senses stop (p.762).

These alien buildings are the backdrop to a dysfunctional new society, a failed utopia of laissez-faire behaviour and no work. The young residents of

¹⁸⁸ J.H. Forshaw and Patrick Abercrombie, *County of London Plan* (London: Macmillan, 1943), p.20.

¹⁸⁹ Elizabeth Bowen, ‘Gone Away’, in *Elizabeth Bowen: Collected Stories*, pp.758-766 (p.759).

Subsequent references to this edition are given in parentheses within the main body of the text. First published in the *Listener*, January 1946.

Brighterville – the name alone crudely parodying a sense of post-war optimism and what was, by 1946, a fledgling welfare state – have a surfeit of leisure and have ‘aged quickly under the stress’ of it. They pay regular trips to the Reserve, and the vicar tells Van Winkle that the Ten Commandments in the church is a particularly popular attraction, relating how one visitor gestured beyond the limits of the Reserve and exclaimed, ‘Out there [...] we’ve got no prohibitions, no inhibitions, no anything!’ (p.760). Crucially for Bowen, art and culture suffer in the face of these altered social relations and conditions: the churchyard has become a repository for displaced pieces of ‘recherché’ church architecture at the behest of the ‘young man’ from ‘the Board of Art’ (p.760). Lara Feigel has observed that Bowen saw what she perceived to be ‘the rise of the working classes’ following Labour’s 1945 election victory ‘as heralding a failure in taste’, and that she experienced great anxiety ‘at the thought of popular culture displacing the older modes of life that she loved’.¹⁹⁰ This dislike, even fear of, novelty was, I will suggest, by no means unique to Bowen within literary circles.

Over the course of this chapter I will follow the development of the post-war reconstruction discourse from its genesis during the war up until the middle of the following decade, at which point there began a Tory-led shift away from centralised, publicly funded reconstruction.¹⁹¹ In parallel I will look to register some of the anxieties expressed in the fiction of Evelyn Waugh, William Sansom, Rose Macaulay, Graham Greene and Rumer Godden during and concerning this initial period of reconstruction. Once again, the texts in question all deal with a moment of change, and all, ostensibly, with the same moment: the post-war moment, a period of transition from wartime to peacetime that blends each of these two states. These different authors each approach this moment with different concerns, and these different concerns are manifested in the different architectural spaces – including ruined spaces – they choose to use in their fictions. Unlike ‘Gone Away’, however,

¹⁹⁰ Lara Feigel, *The Love-Charm of Bombs: Restless Lives in the Second World War* (London: Bloomsbury, 2013), p.282.

¹⁹¹ Alan Powers locates then Housing Minister Harold Macmillan’s deletion of ‘betterment’ and building licenses in 1953 and 1954 respectively – the ‘bonfire of controls’ – as the start of this shift. ‘The altruistic but arduous period of government-led post-war reconstruction, limping rather than striding since the withdrawal of American Marshall Aid in 1947, was ended. Churchill’s order to clear the Festival buildings from the South Bank site immediately the exhibition closed in October 1951 was a symbolic gesture of rupture with the Atlee government’s paternalistic vision. After 1954 all kinds of building work grew exponentially in a new condition of dualism, in which the state still commissioned more than at any previous time, while a boom in commercial property development soon began.’ *Britain*, p.127.

these texts are not much interested in imagining what reconstruction would be like in a literal, material, architectural sense, and even their anxieties regarding that reconstruction are expressed through the spaces of the past and of the present.

The architectural community was, broadly speaking, excited and hopeful about the possibilities afforded by this post-war moment. By contrast, I will suggest, writers tended not to see the ruins simply as something to be cleared away and built over, and they often exhibited a tendency to be suspicious, and sometimes downright fearful, of the new post-war world. The discourse on either side, however, was by no means homogenous; architects found many different reasons for hope, and writers for despair. And neither did the two remain neatly within their respective camps – architects were certainly capable of expressing dismay, especially as planning became building, while writers could find hope, and even a kind of redemption, in the ruins. But if, as I argued in the previous chapter, wartime saw something of a convergence between writers and architects, then the post-war saw a divergence, as both groups surveyed the ruins, and saw different problems and possibilities.

‘Present privation and threatening disaster’: Evelyn Waugh

To talk about reconstruction in the middle of the biggest conflict the world had ever seen was, sometimes consciously, to blur the boundaries between ‘war’ and ‘post-war’, so that the post-war became, in Gill Plain’s words, ‘a state of mind as the war [progressed] through its interminable, deadly grind’.¹⁹² This blurring was forcefully expressed in the foreword to *Picture Post*’s 1941 reconstruction special issue: ‘Our plan for Britain is not something outside of the war, or something *after* the war. It is an essential part of our war aims. It is, indeed, our most positive war aim’.¹⁹³ A year later, an editorial in *The Architectural Review* expressed a similar sentiment: ‘[T]he future grows out of the present [...]. In short, there can be no hard-and-fast line between war-time and a post-war period suddenly packed with opportunities.’¹⁹⁴ The piece goes on to inform readers that the *Review*’s *Reconstruction Supplement* would be discontinued, as it had been deemed to represent ‘a now out-of-date distinction between present and future purposes’, and that the argument for the importance of a

¹⁹² Plain, *Literature of the 1940s: War, Postwar and ‘Peace’*, p.33.

¹⁹³ Editorial, ‘Foreword’, *Picture Post*, 4 January 1941, p.4.

¹⁹⁴ Editorial, ‘The End of Reconstruction’, *The Architectural Review*, vol. 92 (July, 1942), 3-4 (p.3).

concerted post-war reconstruction effort had now been won: 'Reconstruction has come to stay'.¹⁹⁵ And not only had the argument been won in the broadest possible sense, but there was also some consensus as to what reconstruction meant for Britain and how it might work.

Architects saw reconstruction as an opportunity as much as a necessity; an opportunity to rectify what they saw as the mistakes of the past – and in particular of the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries – and to stamp their mark on the cities of the future. Accordingly, a *Review* editorial from 1941 observes that 'the destruction we see around us has a very real place in the preliminary history of reconstruction programmes'.¹⁹⁶ That architects were enthusiastic about the opportunities afforded by post-war reconstruction has been so often repeated in accounts of the period as to have become almost a truism, but it is worth noting this article's proximity in time to the Blitz: it was published in July, just two months after the nightly and sometimes daily raids had ceased in May and before their resumption in the form of the 'Baedeker raids' in spring 1942, followed by the 'little blitz' of 1944 and the V-Weapon attacks that began later that same year. That words such as these were being written in the midst of the conflict, and not just once the dust had settled, demonstrates how architects and critics could, at least in their professional capacities, confront the bombsites with a degree of detachment. This is in evidence too when Forshaw and Abercrombie describe the war as 'a pause in the development of our ancient capital', and write of the destruction wrought by the bombs:

it is fortunately a fact that much of it [the bombing] has either removed property that cried aloud for redevelopment, or has opened up hidden beauties which we hope will not be needlessly obliterated. There is thus presented to London a unique stimulus to better planning.¹⁹⁷

This last point indicates further consensus, neatly encapsulated in the title of an article by architect Maxwell Fry: 'The New Britain Must be Planned'.¹⁹⁸ Reconstruction must not be allowed to proceed unfettered and unchecked, but rather planned and directed according to the country's needs, another key area of

¹⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, p.4.

¹⁹⁶ 'First instalment of a survey of bomb damage to buildings of architectural importance'.

¹⁹⁷ Forshaw and Abercrombie, *County of London Plan*, p.1.

¹⁹⁸ Maxwell Fry, 'The New Britain Must be Planned', *Picture Post*, 4 January 1941, pp.16-20.

consensus, as, for many engaged in the early stages of the reconstruction debate, architectural reconstruction went hand-in-hand with a conscious restructuring of social relations. I have already noted how Forshaw and Abercrombie draw this link, and it is drawn even more explicitly by the *Review* (also in 1943) as it places the rebuilding of Britain within the context of the ‘five giants’ – squalor, ignorance, want, idleness and disease – identified by economist William Beveridge in his report ‘Social Insurance and Allied Services’ (1942), a document that would come to play a key role in the founding of the welfare state.¹⁹⁹ The RIBA plan, too, asks, ‘What are our needs?’ It argues that the first step in reconstruction is to identify the ‘fundamental things that affect us’ in a process that incorporates ‘[s]ocial planning’ as well as ‘physical planning’, and asserts: ‘The conditions for a wider reconstruction exist, and there are few who do not earnestly desire it’.²⁰⁰

There was, as the authors of the plan imply, agreement not only among architects as to the necessity of reconstruction, but also broad public agreement, and even a political consensus, on the issue.²⁰¹ This common agreement has been linked, both at the time and subsequently, to the peculiar character of the war from which Britain had just emerged, a case put succinctly yet emotively in *Picture Post*’s reconstruction special: ‘We have been forced into a knowledge of our dependence on each other’.²⁰² Such an assertion hints at the manner in which the shared material conditions and experiences of the war – what Derek Fraser refers to as ‘the wider definition of the war effort’²⁰³ – created the collective psychological conditions for the establishment of the welfare state. Moreover, not only were they created by such harsh wartime realities as bombing and rationing, but also by the rhetoric around the war effort, particularly as it pertained to life on the Home Front.²⁰⁴ Reconstruction as it was conceived in this initial post-war moment was produced and propelled along

¹⁹⁹ Editorial, ‘Rebuilding Britain?’, *The Architectural Review*, vol. 93 (April, 1943), 112. This issue of the *Review* was a special number to commemorate the RIBA’s Rebuilding Britain exhibition.

‘The difference in the standard of living between those who are wealthy and those who are not wealthy lies not so much in food or clothing as in housing conditions.’ ‘Papers by W.H. Beveridge to Inter-Departmental Committee on Social Insurance and Allied Service’, quoted in: Derek Fraser, *The Evolution of the British Welfare State: A History of Social Policy since the Industrial Revolution*, 4th edn. (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), p.361.

²⁰⁰ RIBA, *Rebuilding Britain*, pp.12-13.

²⁰¹ ‘All political parties felt obliged to speak the language of planning; the electoral issue was who could be trusted to plan.’ David Matless, *Landscape and Englishness* (London: Reaktion Books, 1998), p.199.

²⁰² Editorial, ‘Foreword’, *Picture Post*, p.4.

²⁰³ Fraser, *The Evolution of the British Welfare State*, p.246.

²⁰⁴ Matless, *Landscape and Englishness*, p.184.

by Britain's war effort, and this momentum – along with the public enthusiasm that accompanied it – would, Alan Powers suggests, be sustained to some extent on into the 1960s.²⁰⁵ Elizabeth Bowen, then, displayed unusual reticence and conservatism for the time in constructing the anxious vision of 'Gone Away'. She was not alone.

In 1959 Evelyn Waugh looked back on the time of writing *Brideshead Revisited* during the first months of 1944 as 'a bleak period of present privation and threatening disaster'.²⁰⁶ On leave from the army, it should perhaps come as no surprise that his present was bleak, or that he felt, in a time of war, that disaster was always around the corner. However, it is not a fear of an immediate, violent future that Waugh refers to here and which his novel registers, but a more pervasive yet no less powerfully felt fear of the post-war world that is to come. In stark contrast to the hopeful reconstruction rhetoric – or rather *because of* that very rhetoric – Waugh is horrified at the thought of the changes that might be wrought. And from the novel's beginning, he, like Bowen, identifies this threat to the old ways of life as originating in two linked phenomena: a new, planned built environment, and a newly emancipated working class.

The novel opens during the war, with 'C' Company of the British Army, in which Waugh's narrator Charles Ryder is a captain, stationed at 'the extreme limit of the city' of Glasgow. The camp stands 'where, until quite lately, had been pasture and ploughland', and the landscape has been 'mutilated' by its presence. Yet, we are told, this mutilation was inevitable, even without the imposition of the camp; had the army not got there first, the 'housing estates and cinemas' – working-class dwellings and the attendant forms of popular entertainment – and the 'municipal contractors' with their 'system of drainage' would have. The land would not have survived 'another year of peace' (pp.1-2). It is 'peace', and the pre-war planned development that it entailed, that is the destructive force here, and, Waugh implies, its post-war resumption is inevitable.²⁰⁷ Just pages later, and in a miniature version of the novel's

²⁰⁵ Powers, *Britain*, p.127.

²⁰⁶ Evelyn Waugh, 'Preface', in *Brideshead Revisited: The Sacred and Profane Memories of Captain Charles Ryder* (London: Penguin, 2000), pp.ix-x (p.ix). Subsequent references to this edition are given in parentheses within the main body of the text.

²⁰⁷ Waugh's sense of a continuity between pre-war development and post-war reconstruction was prescient. Reconstruction was, at least in part, a continuation of the socially conscious turn in British architecture during the 1930s (see Powers, *Britain*, p.74 and John Summerson, *Architecture in England Since Wren*, pp.17-18), even if its proponents and commentators described the war as 'a phase of revolution' to which architecture must be attuned, and in which it must play its part

key strategy – the use of a fantasy past to express grave misgivings in the face of a future only ever sketchily implied – Ryder likens the ‘planless maze’ of the camp and the ‘unfinished housing-scheme’ to an archaeological dig in which future generations will find ‘a valuable link between the citizen-slave communities of the twentieth century and the tribal anarchy which succeeded them’. Turning from this vision Ryder’s thoughts jump to Hooper (pp.4-5), the character in the novel who stands most clearly for the post-war ‘anarchy’ feared by Ryder and Waugh alike; the character who is, in Plain’s phrase, the ‘apotheosis’ of the post-war as his author conceived of it.²⁰⁸

The twin threats of a newly empowered working class and town planning are linked once again in the novel’s prologue through Hooper, who is shown to be – and to stand for – the opposite of everything that the novel will go on to identify as valuable and desirable, as well as of Charles himself; as Jacqueline McDonnell suggests, Charles finds Hooper to be ‘the antithesis of himself’.²⁰⁹ Hooper, we are told, did not share Charles’s childhood passion for literature and myth, and while Charles’s ‘eyes were dry to all save poetry’, Hooper ‘had wept often’, but never in the face of beauty (p.6). Thus he has committed the double crime of being both unmanly and without taste. What is more, Hooper is without strength of character, not in control – or, even worse, not *wishing* to be in control – of his own fate; he joined the army ‘under compulsion’, having ‘made every feeble effort in his power’ to avoid it, but once in ‘accepted it, he said, “like the measles”’ (p.6). Hooper has learned an alternative narrative of Englishness to that known and cherished by Charles. This narrative contains ‘few battles’, but consists instead of ‘a profusion of detail about humane legislation and recent industrial change’ (p.6). This is a history of new technologies and shifting social relations, a ‘recent’, *modern* history, and Charles sees Hooper as a creature of modernity: he has ‘an over-mastering regard for efficiency’, despite being himself unreliable and inefficient, and, once kitted up in his army ‘equipment’, he looks ‘scarcely human’. Most threateningly, Hooper does not respect the social divisions enshrined in the organisation of the army: when asked why he has readied his own kit rather than leaving it to his servant he replies, ‘He had his own stuff to do’ (p.7). Hierarchies are cast aside in the interests of

(Editorial, Foreword to the *Destruction and Reconstruction* special issue, *The Architectural Review*, vol. 90 [July, 1941], 1-2).

²⁰⁸ Plain, *Literature of the 1940s*, p.171.

²⁰⁹ Jacqueline McDonnell, *Evelyn Waugh* (London: Macmillan, 1988), p.100.

efficiency; non-compliance threatens the stability of the entire system, and there is a sense here that the working classes are eroding an entire established way of life. This theme emerges later in the text with explicit reference to Hooper as Charles thinks of how Lady Marchmain's three brothers – who were all killed in the Great War – had to 'die to make a world for Hooper' and 'so that things might be safe for the travelling salesman', the archetypal resident of the suburban sprawl that creeps closer in the first pages of the novel, 'with his polygonal pince-nez, his fat wet hand-shake, his grinning dentures' (pp.127-128).

The RIBA plan for London's reconstruction was published a year before Waugh began to write *Brideshead*, and it demonstrates that architects and planners were speaking exactly the kind of 'post-war' language that he rails against in the novel. It was, as I have suggested, a language that chimed with the country's mood, and with the public's appetite for change. The RIBA plan is very much interested in this appetite, and it talks about reconstruction first and foremost as a democratic and democratising project, providing a clear example of how the rhetoric of a 'people's reconstruction' grew out of the rhetoric of a 'people's war' (although one would turn out to be as hollow as the other). The authors charge the population with a practical task: that of keeping themselves informed about the necessities and possibilities of reconstruction:

Every man and woman in Britain can lend a hand in the national task of reconstruction, and they can equip themselves now for helping with the job. They can find out what needs doing and how well it could be done, and then they can take action.²¹⁰

The plan insists that the public take possession of reconstruction; it is an 'urgent' problem on a national scale, but it is also 'intimate', involving a collection of individuals, and becoming 'as well-informed as possible' is 'the individual obligation imposed by the national opportunity'.²¹¹ It sees all this as a necessary continuation of the present war effort: 'One of the war posters portrays Mr Churchill, saying: "Deserve Victory!" [...] Reconstruction makes similar demands. The people of Britain will get the reconstruction they deserve'.²¹² And the plan, to make matters worse, is avowedly modern – even modernist – in its outlook, drawing on the town

²¹⁰ RIBA, *Rebuilding Britain*, p.3.

²¹¹ *Ibid.*, p.3.

²¹² *Ibid.*, p.5.

planning work of Tony Garnier and Le Corbusier for inspiration: a tradition that Waugh had condemned as a foreign ‘plague’ just a few years before.²¹³

Although many in Britain, like Waugh, still favoured the Neo-Georgian style – derisively labelled ‘Bankers Georgian’ by members of the architectural press – over more up-to-date alternatives,²¹⁴ he was out of step with public opinion when it came to planning and reconstruction. RIBA’s exhortation to the general public was not the rallying cry of the radical Left, but of an august institution with a royal charter, and although in reality reconstruction never saw the radical involvement of the people in the shaping of their own environment that the plan envisaged, it must have seemed to Waugh that all his fears were coming true when the electorate voted in a Labour government in July 1945, less than two months after the publication of *Brideshead*.²¹⁵ In the event, he was forced to rationalise his own position as self-appointed bastion of authentic Englishness by writing in his diary in November 1946: ‘The French called the occupying German army “the grey lice”. That is precisely how I regard the occupying army of English socialist government’.²¹⁶

Brideshead Revisited, then, records a landscape – political, historical, national, as well as literal – that is being eroded. Gill Plain suggests that the novel looks to the past as a way to escape the present, ‘an alternative habitus in the face of an inhospitable reality’, but that this past is already hopelessly lost, leaving only mourning.²¹⁷ Waugh too wrote of the book in similar terms in 1959, describing it as a ‘panegyric’ (p.x). Yet there is something in the sheer fictitiousness of the pre-war world which Waugh conjures up that makes his text more than just an elegy.²¹⁸ Writing with specific reference to houses in Waugh’s fiction, Adam Piette has

²¹³ Waugh, ‘A Call to Orders’, p.216. The authors of the RIBA plan acknowledged that, in drawing on the modernist town planning tradition, they were running the risk of ‘being attacked as “un-British”’ (*Rebuilding Britain*, p.24). The RIBA’s was not the only example of a plan heavily indebted to modernism: M.A.R.S. too, unsurprisingly, drew on this tradition. Arthur Korn and Felix J. Samuely, ‘A Master Plan for London: Based on Research Carried Out by the Planning Committee of the M.A.R.S. Group’, *The Architectural Review*, vol. 91 (June, 1942), 143-150 (p.150).

²¹⁴ Waugh, ‘A Call to Orders’, p.216. Lionel Brett was moved to write of Bankers Georgian: ‘It would be nice to feel that only a few distinguished diehards like this kind of building. Unfortunately it is not true. Everyone likes it. It dazzles the proletariat while it reassures the plutocrat. The fight against it is waged by a tiny minority of artists upheld by a gallant crew of cranks’. ‘The New Haussmann’, *The Architectural Review*, vol. 93 (January, 1943), 23-26 (p.25).

²¹⁵ Waugh noted 28th May as the date of *Brideshead*’s publication in his diary. Evelyn Waugh, *The Diaries of Evelyn Waugh*, ed. by Michael Davie (London: Phoenix, 2009), p.660.

²¹⁶ Waugh, *The Diaries of Evelyn Waugh*, p.698.

²¹⁷ Plain, *Literature of the 1940s*, pp.149, 169 & 175-176.

²¹⁸ Plain also emphasises the fictional, fantastic quality of the past Waugh evokes (*Literature of the 1940s*, p.149).

argued that these buildings ‘are themselves *reconstructed* by the beholder and inhabitant, and are never the focus of absolute nostalgia, but rather of a provisional nostalgia for a fictional world’ [emphasis in the original].²¹⁹ Waugh mobilises an idealised, romanticised and fictionalised pre-war past against a post-war present and future, and he does this primarily through material elements within that past: works of art, landscapes, and architecture. He turns these elements against the perceived threat of the present, and the sense of *activity* implied by Piette’s choice of words – ‘reconstructed’, ‘provisional’ – is key here. The book is not so much an account of a lost past as a way of registering what is for Waugh the potency and importance of those values for which the book’s ‘past’ is made to stand. And, crucially, this ‘past’ can be more beautiful, more vital, and ultimately more potent, precisely because it is a provisional, fictional world brought to bear on the post-war moment.²²⁰

This work is begun in the prologue, using what becomes a persistent trope in the novel: the contrast between a dead and deadening modernity and a vital and vitalising ‘past’. Alerted to the camp’s new location, Charles is immediately thrown into a kind of reverie merely upon hearing the name Brideshead, which is itself fantastically potent: ‘a conjuror’s name of such ancient power’. Turning to the landscape that surrounds the house he finds a vision utterly different from ‘the haphazard litter of corrugated iron’ and the ‘zoo-noises’ of the camp (p.12). The scene is picturesque in the truest sense, a composition (not all planning, apparently, is bad), ‘an exquisite manmade landscape’ with ‘Doric temple’ and ‘ivy-grown arch’. It is a grim irony that the landscape ‘had been planned and planted a century and a half ago so that, at about this date, it might be seen in its maturity’, just in time for the army’s arrival. Although contrived, all the component parts of the scene are in perfect harmony with each other and their surroundings: the land is ‘still unravished’, bordered by a ‘neighbourly horizon’, and the house itself, tucked away out of sight, ‘lay, couched among the lime trees like a hind in the bracken’, entirely at home in the landscape. The antithesis of the ‘mutilated’ landscape of the first pages, this scene is almost impossibly luxurious, being ‘a sequestered place, enclosed and embraced in a single, winding valley’, yet also ‘spacious’, full of ‘wide green spaces’ (p.13).

²¹⁹ Piette, *Imagination at War*, p.97.

²²⁰ The imagined future would turn out to be a fiction too, and Waugh noted in 1959 that, despite his fears at the time of writing *Brideshead*, ‘The advance of Hooper has been held up at several points’ (‘Preface’, p.x).

The contrived nature of the house and its surroundings is key to its power in the novel, because it is, for Charles, part of the seduction. Sebastian tells him: 'We had a castle a mile away, down by the village. Then we took a fancy to the valley and pulled the castle down, carted the stones up here, and built a new house' (p.71). Brideshead itself, then, is an unusually fictitious entity even in the context of Waugh's fictional 'past'. It does not give an historically truthful account of itself and so cannot be valued as a relic – as a connection to a bygone era. Instead it is valuable precisely because it was dismantled and put back together again: a decidedly un-Hooperish project. Such an endeavour displays the assertiveness that Hooper lacks, but it is also an act of sheer indulgence, of whim and 'fancy' – the creation of a fantasy world. It is also a striking reversal of Waugh's attitude towards the contrived, 'sham' architecture of Llanabba Castle in *Decline and Fall*. In the earlier novel the contrived 'castle' is, like King's Thursday, an indictment of the social aspirations of the building's owners, aspirations which are doomed to failure. No such failure haunts Brideshead; although the world for which it stands might be equally doomed, and the architecture equally fanciful, the family's taste and class (in both senses of the word) is genuine.

Charles's descriptions of the house serve to further emphasise the constructed and construed nature of its beauty. The interior is an over-the-top hotchpotch of styles from various times and places: a 'Soanesque library', a 'Chinese drawing-room', a 'Pompeian parlour', a 'tapestry-hung hall', and a Mediterranean terrace complete with a view over lime groves. Once again, such is the luxury of the setting that it seems almost to distort the space that it occupies, and the view of the artificial lakes from the terrace gives a visitor the impression that he or she 'could have dropped a pebble into the first of them immediately below one's feet' (p.72). The fountain is a similarly busy mix of styles: 'formal tropical vegetation and wild English fern' combine with 'fantastic tropical animals' and 'an Egyptian obelisk' (p.73). And not only is Charles seduced by these surroundings, but he is *vitalised* by them, experiencing a 'conversion to the Baroque' so intense that 'I felt a whole new system of nerves alive within me', 'a life-giving spring' (pp.73-74). Modern architecture and design has, by contrast, quite the opposite effect. When his wife informs him that she has converted the barn into a studio for him, and shows him its write-up in *Country Life*, he laments that 'wide oak boards now covered the earthen floor', remembers 'the smell of the place, which would now be lost', and observes

that ‘the great timbered roof, which before had been lost in shadow, now stood out stark, well lit, with clean white plaster between the beams’. The article – in lines that perfectly ape the style and priorities of the contemporaneous architectural press – describes it as a ‘happy example of architectural good manners’ and a ‘tactful adaptation of traditional material to modern needs’ (pp.216-217). The impact of the ship’s interior upon Charles during the crossing from New York is more acute, yet described in comparable terms. The ship’s halls are ‘without any splendour’, and their contents appear to have been ‘designed perhaps by a sanitary engineer’. The light here too is clinical, ‘suffused from scores of hollows, giving an even glow, casting no shadows’ (p.221). The sum effect is one of lifelessness.

The vitalising impact of Brideshead on Charles has a tangible product in the novel: his painting. Brideshead turns him into an artist, both in the sense that it inspires him to surpass his previous attempts at painting, and in the sense that it gives him his profession. Charles finds he is able to feed off the beauty of the place in producing artworks of it and within it. This happens for the first time as he draws the fountain and finds that, ‘by some odd chance, for the thing was far beyond me,’ he has produced ‘a very passable echo of Piranesi’ (p.73). When painting ‘a romantic landscape’ onto one of the walls in the house he finds again that, ‘by luck and the happy mood of the moment, [he] made a success of it’, and that the process becomes almost involuntary: ‘The brush seemed somehow to do what was wanted of it’ (p.74). He finds inspiration in the family’s second home, Marchmain House, too, when he is commissioned to paint a series of pictures of it before its demolition (to be replaced by a block of flats), so that they might serve as a ‘record’ (p.203). Once again, he paints with an unusual ease and a sense of excitement:

I found myself buoyed and exhilarated. [...] I could do nothing wrong. [...] There were no difficulties; the intricate multiplicity of light and colour became a whole; the right colour was where I wanted it on the palette; each brush stroke, as soon as it was complete, seemed to have been there always (p.204).

Charles feels himself simply a conduit, the outcome of the project predestined.

George McCartney argues that Charles’s career as an architectural painter ‘becomes an elegiac mission to record the remains of a dying civilisation lest it disappear without a trace’, and that ‘Waugh seems to have thought his fiction would

perform a similar function'.²²¹ However, the notion that both writer and character are engaged in a process of *preservation* does not quite ring true. A sense of predestination, of inevitable processes at work, comes to characterise – in a distinctly different manner – not only these early, inspired works, but the rest of Charles's career. He is frequently asked to paint houses, like Marchmain House, 'soon to be deserted or debased', and observes that his 'arrival seemed often to be only a few paces ahead of the auctioneer's, a presage of doom' (p.212). When made in the context of Brideshead and the life of the Marchmain family, Charles's paintings complement the world that they describe; they come naturally; they belong to that world. Not so with the paintings that Charles makes subsequently. These seem almost part and parcel of the demolition and rebuilding process, of that very modernising project that Charles and Waugh alike find so abhorrent. The paintings are complicit in the past's destruction; they do not record for posterity that which is being lost, but rather record the very fact of its demolition. It is this destructive process that Charles goes seeking as a source of renewed inspiration in the jungles of Central America, 'the wild lands where man had deserted his post and the jungle was creeping back to its old strongholds' (p.212). This is a journey into the doom that the book both predicts and rails against, a search for 'guttred palaces and cloisters embowered in weed, derelict churches where the vampire-bats hung in the dome like dry seed-pods' (p.213), for a real-life, present-day analogue to the imagined archaeological site from the prologue. The link between the jungle as a literal place that Charles visits and its operation as a metaphor for the much-feared decline of Western civilisation is made explicit when, asked by his wife whether he thinks he will be able to adapt to painting condemned buildings once again, Charles replies, 'It's just another jungle closing in' (p.217). But there is something anticlimactic about Charles's American quest, and he fails to find the sought for inspiration, producing only a series of paintings that are, in his wife's words, 'perfectly brilliant and really rather beautiful in a sinister way, but somehow I don't feel they are quite *you*' (p.214) [emphasis in the original].

Waugh's novel and its protagonist ultimately find that only religious faith offers any kind of resolution or comfort in this post-war moment. (This is unsurprising within the context of the novel. The 'past' that is evoked – and *invoked*

²²¹ McCartney, *Confused Roaring*, p.74.

– in the face of a distasteful present is by its very nature insufficient and insubstantial: it is a fantasy.) But, unless perhaps the reader shares that faith, this conclusion feels as unsatisfying as the fruits of Charles's trip. Musing upon the construction of Brideshead, Charles asserts that the work was 'all brought to nothing' when faced with the advent of 'the age of Hooper' (p.325). The post-war will undo the accumulated history of centuries. Left intact will be 'a small red flame' – his faith – itself the product of Brideshead: his experiences have brought him to Roman Catholicism, and he could not have made that journey of faith without the 'past' that the house both stands for and contains (p.326). This is unsatisfying because it reads simultaneously like an admission of defeat and an assertion that defeat does not matter – a refusal of the debate with which Waugh has so enthusiastically, if angrily, engaged in the course of the novel. By turning inwards, away from the realities of the post-war moment, Waugh leaves Charles hopelessly stuck in his imagined past, without a post-war part to play.

In the Ruins: William Sansom and Rose Macaulay

In an essay published in 1948, three years after the publication of *Brideshead*, Bowen uses an image comparable to Waugh's 'jungle closing in'. During a passage in which she bemoans the recently erected '[m]onster-high' flat blocks that 'statically trample upon the neighbourhood' of St John's Wood, Bowen observes the 'lines of bomb-damaged villas [that] are being left to rot, trees of their gardens growing in at their windows; someone is waiting, greedy, for their ideal sites'. Here Bowen hones in on one particular facet of the 'post-war', and the process of architectural reconstruction is figured as an undesirable but unstoppable growth that is also a kind of death, with developers waiting to devour the 'little cadavers' of the ruined houses.²²² Bowen was, as I have suggested, at odds with the prevailing enthusiasm for reconstruction, and the excitement and optimism expressed by architects and critics while the war was still being waged lingered in these immediate post-war years, with John Summerson proclaiming architecture to be 'the profession

²²² Elizabeth Bowen, 'Regent's Park and St John's Wood', *Flower of Cities: A Book of London, Studies and Sketches by Twenty-Two Authors* (London: Max Parrish, 1949), pp.149-158 (pp.156-158).

which faces the unparalleled opportunities of the post-war world'.²²³ This optimism was complemented by the necessary legal and political apparatus to move reconstruction along,²²⁴ and Bowen's use of such imagery – which, like Waugh's, implies an unstoppable, overbearing process – is within this context. But this literary trope of humanity and its dwellings becoming enveloped by a powerful natural force intent on reclaiming built space occurs in two other post-war texts – most famously in Rose Macaulay's *The World My Wilderness* (written in 1948, published in 1950), but also in William Sansom's short story 'A Small World' (published in 1948) – and in these instances it is employed to address something more elemental than the process of rebuilding. In this section I will consider how these two texts, particularly Macaulay's, address the material fact of ruination, and how they use architectural ruination as a means to explore the moral, spiritual and psychological implications of the post-war moment. In so doing I will draw also upon some instances in which architects were similarly concerned with the place of the broken and the intangible in reconstruction.

On 25th August 1947 Macaulay wrote a letter to her sister in which she asked,

What has happened to the human race, that it does less & less work every year? You would say that in England it is the present [Labour] government, but I think that doesn't account for the great psychological blight that has descended on the world.²²⁵

For Bowen and Waugh alike, 'post-war' meant profound shifts in the country's social, political and cultural make-up. But for Macaulay, as her remarks here suggest, it meant something different, something at once more personal *and* more universal – a kind of shared malady. I will turn to how this theme is played out in *The World My Wilderness*'s use of 'jungle' shortly, but first I want to consider Sansom's short story, as its use of comparable imagery will provide both an interesting comparison with and a useful counterpoint to Macaulay's.

²²³ Summerson, *Architecture in England Since Wren*, p.37. From a revised edition published in 1948; originally published in 1946.

²²⁴ For example, the Town and Country Planning Act, passed in 1947, was a key piece of legislation for reconstruction (see Powers, *Britain*, p.127). However, a mood that Aileen Tatton-Brown called 'something very like popular disillusionment' began to creep in towards the end of the decade, as the realities of reconstruction did not live up to its promises. 'Progress Report: County of London Plan', *The Architectural Review*, vol. 105 (May, 1949), 223-230 (p.223). This shift in the public's mood anticipates the Conservative victory in the 1951 elections.

²²⁵ Rose Macaulay, *Letters to a Sister*, ed. by Constance Babington Smith (London: Collins, 1964), p.133.

'A Small World' tells the story of the death of a married couple, the Cravens. The pair are marked from the very beginning, both in name – the wife, Dodo, has an overdetermined first name to go with her overdetermined surname – and explicitly by the narrative voice: they are 'more than usually destined for rapid extinction'.²²⁶ Their inevitable demise is linked to the growth of a convolvulus in the garden of their flat in 'a lost suburb', the huge plant moving ever closer to 'the peeling stucco' of their already decaying home, drawing sustenance from the 'digested remnants' of 'pollarded trees sucked dry and torn down years before' (pp.76-77). This plant has the volition of an animal, experiencing 'hunger', moving with 'ruthless agility', its leaves stretching out 'heart-nailed fingers' and 'a thousand tongues towards what was patently to be their last objective, the house' (p.77). When the Cravens are killed by a faulty aeroplane tumbling out of the sky and crashing into their home, their deaths are heavily ironised, being prefaced by the pair looking skywards and taking comfort in the safety afforded them in this post-war moment: 'Both thought of past air raids, of the two past wars whose bombardment had left miraculously the house unscathed. They warmed to their gifted security' (p.79). Such irony, the narrator suggests, is entirely appropriate:

Their story was finally a contemporary one, a story not of familiar passions and local forces, but of independent and possibly capricious movements and effects over the great distances that have made the world so small. Possibly capricious – but possibly interwoven beyond the wildest dreams of prescience, possibly the first faint blue-printing of the system scorned as fate (pp.81-82).

The manner of their deaths chimes perfectly with the contemporary moment, a moment characterised by the impersonal and the ineffable. The technology of modernity has created such conditions, reshaping time and space; even fate itself – mechanistic, a 'system' with blueprints – is somehow implicated in this technology. However, the repeated 'possibly' proves key, with the story's close insisting upon the marginality of the human experience:

When at last it clambered up on top of the charred skeleton of the house that had survived two wars, when finally it rotted and pulled

²²⁶ William Sansom, 'A Small World', in *Something Terrible, Something Lovely* (London: The Hogarth Press, 1948), pp.76-82 (p.76). Subsequent references to this edition are given in parentheses within the main body of the text.

even those black ribs to the ground – then it had nothing to do with the narrow human conflict of the Cravens. The convolvulus was just pursuing its vegetable course, a vegetable on the move, eating, mopping up. It is never the cow that chews the cud, the cud it is that quietly champs the cow. In its own time. This vegetating ignores the single life. It goes for the larger fry of civilisations, races, genus. And as a vegetable, wins (p.82).

This text warns against seeing accident, disaster, irony as the result of human activity; these are but small incidents in a natural cycle of death and growth that is completely ignorant of the individual, of the ‘single life’. As with the close of *Brideshead*, there is a sense of hopelessness here, although Waugh sounds that note less emphatically than Sansom. For Waugh the ‘age of Hooper’ is an inevitability, but it is also undoubtedly the result of human activity, and there is, after all, always the consolation of faith. For Sansom here human activity is ultimately insignificant, leaving humanity – both individually and collectively, as a single life and as a race – with no agency in a post-war world.

Macaulay does not consider the individual to be as insignificant as Sansom does. In identifying a ‘great psychological blight that has descended on the world’ she links – as I have suggested and will go on to explore – the universal and the personal. The malady is total – a general decline affecting the whole world, beyond the scope of politics. Yet it is also personal, ‘psychological’, located in the individual. This self-contradictory ‘blight’ is figured in the ‘ruined, jungled waste’²²⁷ of London’s bombsites, which are the thematic centre of *The World My Wilderness*. It is played out in the novel as a tension between, on the one hand, the eternal and inevitable cycle of death and rebirth – the ‘vegetable’ destruction that Sansom evokes – and on the other the individual’s need to survive in a post-war world, psychologically and spiritually as much as physically, with the latter concern being focussed chiefly on the character of Barbary and her relationship to the ruined spaces of the wilderness. For Macaulay, then (as well as for Sansom), the post-war moment provokes thoughts of the precariousness, the contingency of human existence, and war ruins and the vegetation that moves to cover them – being both an actualisation of and a metaphor for this contingency – provide the settings and images through which to explore such thoughts. Architects too, on occasion, were moved to consider

²²⁷ Rose Macaulay, *The World My Wilderness* (London: Virago, 1983), p.56. Subsequent references to this edition are given in parentheses within the main body of the text.

the ruins in comparable terms, and I want now to explore some of these before returning to Macaulay's novel.

Architects and planners were confronted, of course, by the same ruined spaces as the writers. However, their responses had necessarily to be different from that of Sansom and Macaulay; the whole project of reconstruction rested upon the capacity to look

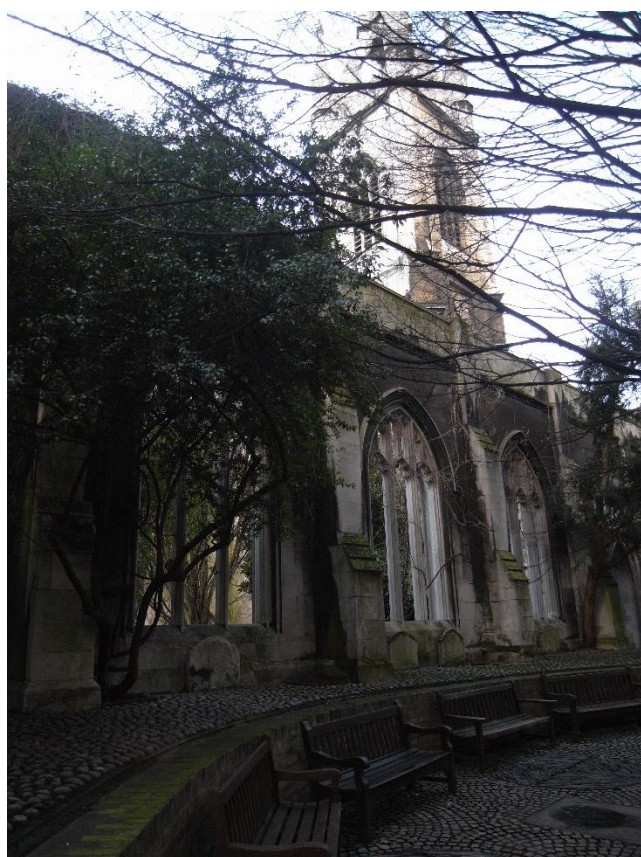


Figure 7, St Dunstan-in-the-East, photographed in 2014

upon the bombed wastelands that littered Britain's cities and see something other than chaos, or at least the possibility of something else. But discussions around such sites were not always focussed exclusively on what should fill them – on what new building should take the place of the old once its rubble had been cleared away – but also addressed the ruins and ruination directly. As with the reconstruction debate more generally, this ruin-focussed conversation began while the war was still being fought, and

while the destruction that had necessitated it was not yet over. In January 1944 *The Architectural Review* published an editorial piece entitled 'Save Us Our Ruins'. This was followed by a letter to *The Times* printed on Tuesday 15th 1944 headed 'Ruined City Churches'. Signatories to the letter included Kenneth Clark and T.S. Eliot, and its authors commended the piece in the *Review*. Finally, the *Review*'s publishers, the Architectural Press, published a short book, *Bombed Churches as War Memorials*, in 1945. These texts, as the last two titles suggest, focussed their interest on a very particular set of buildings: the City of London Churches. The initial *Review* article sets out its aim in the following terms:

It is proposed that a few of the bombed churches of Britain be selected to remain with us as ruins, essential in the state in which bombing has left them, that they be laid out and planted appropriately, and that they be regarded as permanent places of open-air worship, meditation and recreation, as national war memorials of this war and focal points of picturesque delight in the planned surroundings of the post-war world.²²⁸

Heather Wiebe has identified in both the letter to *The Times* and *Bombed Churches* ‘a tension between the urge to retain a kind of tangible immediacy – some palpable remnant of war – and the desire to smooth over that immediacy, to neutralise its



Figure 8, Christ Church Greyfriars, photographed in 2014

disruptive force’.²²⁹ The tension is evident too in this, the article’s basic premise. Some ruins, the author argues, should be ‘saved’, which is to say they should be exempted from the rebuilding that will inevitably take

place around them. However, they should also be ‘laid out’, making them a part of their ‘planned surroundings’. This is reconstruction that incorporates ruination – that takes something of the ‘essential’ state of ruination and puts it to work in a newly planned environment.²³⁰

²²⁸ Editorial, ‘Save Us Our Ruins’, *The Architectural Review*, vol. 95 (January, 1944), 13-14 (p.13).

²²⁹ Heather Wiebe, *Britten’s Unquiet Past: Sound and Memory in Postwar Reconstruction* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), pp.204-205.

²³⁰ Although these three texts call for ruins to be ‘saved’ they are certainly not ‘anti-reconstruction’, and in fact employ rhetoric comparable to that which I have identified elsewhere in reconstruction texts. For example: ‘The cities which men make reflect their souls. [...] The devastation of war has given us an opportunity which will never come again’. Walter Matthews, ‘Foreword by the Dean of St. Paul’s’, in *Bombed Churches as War Memorials*, ed by W.R. Matthews (Cheam: The Architectural Press War Address, 1945), p.3. And also: ‘To restore all the Wren churches as copies of their former selves with all their priceless handiwork imitated instead of spontaneously created as it originally was, would be a miserable *admission of defeat*’ [my emphasis], ‘Save Us Our Ruins’, p.14.

The trauma with which such sites had become associated, both literally and metaphorically, during the war could, these texts suggest, be mitigated after the war by the proper, planned arrangement of their ruins, so that they might become, in the words of the letter, places of ‘quietness and rest’, of ‘spiritual refreshment and physical and mental relaxation’.²³¹ Moreover, they should become also sites of memory, or more particularly of memorialisation, the latter being a collective, organised – and organising – activity, whereas the former might constitute a personal, perhaps involuntary experience, leaving the individual prone to finding in the preserved ruins the chaos of war rather than the planned comforts of peace and reconstruction. Such sites would allow for appropriate remembrance, and I use ‘appropriate’ in two, connected, senses. Firstly, appropriate to the extent that they might fit into what Sara Wasson calls the ‘existing structures of memorialisation’ inherited from the First World War.²³² And, secondly, to the extent that they might provide a memorial, in the material sense, appropriate to the nature of the present conflict. It is in this regard that the ruined state of the proposed sites is key. Both ‘Save Us Our Ruins’ and ‘Ruined City Churches’ assert that existing memorials to the First World War had failed to capture in any meaningful way the ‘experience’ that they were intended to commemorate, with the letter suggesting that such a failure was ‘inevitable’.²³³ However, they both argue, the peculiar conditions of the present war – and, crucially, its consequent material remnants – provide an opportunity to close the gap between the lived experience of the war and its physical memorialisation this time around. London’s direct implication in the war is the key, and the letter’s authors ask, ‘Could there be a more appropriate memorial of the nation’s crisis than the preservation of fragments of its battleground?’²³⁴ Such a memorial is deemed ‘appropriate’ for its capacity to communicate something of the essence of the conflict: ‘A Georgian obelisk is of another world than the tanks and trenches of the twentieth century. The ruins – for better or worse – are of our age.

A number of the bombed City churches have now indeed been converted into public gardens – St-Dunstan-in-the-East (Figure 7) and Christ Church Greyfriars (Figure 8) among them – and are managed by the Corporation of the City of London. There is, however, an emphasis on recreation rather than remembrance.

²³¹ Letter reprinted in *Bombed Churches as War Memorials*, p.4.

²³² Sara Wasson, *Urban Gothic of the Second World War: Dark London* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), p.132. See for an account of the links between post-First World War and post-Second World national remembrance.

²³³ ‘Save Us Our Ruins’, p.14; *Bombed Churches*, p.4.

²³⁴ *Bombed Churches*, p.4.

Their drama is our drama'.²³⁵ The ruins are *truthful*, and thus capable of reminding 'posterity of the reality of the sacrifices upon which its apparent security has been built'.²³⁶

In 1947, while travelling in Spain and Portugal, Rose Macaulay found, in Feigel's words, 'a consolation for grief; a reminder that everything eventually passed' in the ruins that she encountered there, but she could not find a similar comfort in the post-war ruins of home.²³⁷ She wrote in *Pleasure of Ruins* (an account of her ruin hunting published in 1953) that, in order to be a source of any enjoyment, '[r]uin must be a fantasy', and the bombsites were all too real.²³⁸ There is insufficient distance – temporal and experiential – between the ruin and the viewer; the bombsites simply communicate too much of the events with which they are associated, too much of 'our drama'. Some of those involved in the planning and reconstruction of Britain's cities sought to appropriate the ruined fragment precisely because of its particular potency, but in doing so sought, as I have shown, also to channel this power, to place it within the structured narrative of a nation's post-war remembrance. The ruins at the heart of *The World My Wilderness* are raw, unmediated, unplanned, 'stark and bare'.²³⁹ They are what happened before reconstruction could be fully mobilised, the spaces generated by that gap between war and rebuilding, when reconstruction was literally just a set of, often disputed, plans.²⁴⁰ Macaulay's text thus offers an alternative vision to that of the planned city which has safely recuperated its ruins. The wilderness becomes, in Matless's words, 'a symbol of something other than orderly reconstruction'²⁴¹: the disruptive force that planning sought to tame. However, as Macaulay's identification of a universal 'blight' suggests, the text is not – in the manner of *Brideshead* – a way for its author to participate in a conversation about the 'post-war' and its desirable and/or undesirable elements. Rather it is an

²³⁵ 'Save Us Our Ruins', p.14.

²³⁶ *Bombed Churches*, p.4.

²³⁷ Feigel, *The Love-Charms of Bombs*, pp.434-435.

²³⁸ Rose Macaulay, *Pleasure of Ruins* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1953), p.454.

²³⁹ Macaulay, *Pleasure of Ruins*, p.453.

²⁴⁰ Although rebuilding began during the 1940s, bombsites were a persistent presence in London for decades after the war. Much of the ruined wasteland which Macaulay's novel describes is now covered by the Barbican Estate, on which construction did not start until 1963.

²⁴¹ Matless, *Landscape and Englishness*, p.233.

evocation of that post-war moment – and of its spaces – as Macaulay found them, and it asks not so much what ought to be done *with* these spaces as what might be done *in* them. These ruins, the novel suggests, can provide a correlative for post-war experience, and, broadly, the novel explores this experience in two senses, by considering, on the one hand, the idea of a universal blight, and, on the other, Barbary's own personal post-war guilt. I will focus initially on the former.

When amongst the ruins, the novel's narrative voice often detaches itself entirely from its characters, turning its attention instead to the wasteland. In many instances this focus on the space itself is highly topographical, and the narrator engages in a meticulous mapping of the ruined city. Barbary and her stepbrother Raoul move through 'a wilderness of little streets, caves and cellars, the foundations of a wrecked merchant city' (p.53), and as they do the now-vanished London is conjured around them, but never *by* them. Although Barbary walks the ruins 'picturing them as paved streets', the scope of her imagination is limited: 'She knew nothing: she had never seen, nor would, that old pre-ruin world' (p.181). In the verbal 'map' that follows – detailing the location of the deceased streets over which she walks, and the various businesses which occupied it – Barbary is left behind as the text digs down into the city's past. This digging reveals multiple, layered histories, placing the Blitz within a long genealogy of urban destruction. The buildings, businesses and people that occupied the streets most recently before the bombs came are 'as vanished' as their predecessors through the ages – they have come to the same fate. The city's destruction is a never-ending, cyclical process: 'the crickets in the brambly copse that sprawled where Windsor Court and Wood Street Square had been, chirped like the ghosts of a chatter of burned typewriters' (p.182). And this theme recurs later in the same passage when the digging continues further, right down to 'only a few feet' above Roman London. Here, in 1940s London, Barbary sits in ruined cellars of the City businesses, amongst 'the new traders, the pirates, the racketeers, the black marketers, the robber bands': the spivs. They have, unwittingly, come home: 'Commerce, begun in peddling and piracy, slinks down into peddling and piracy again' (p.183). The City has found, in the practices of the wasteland's outcasts, its ancient origins, which are also its inevitable future.

In *Pleasure of Ruins* Macaulay asserts that the enjoyment of ruins involves an awakened awareness of temporality, a 'romantic and conscious swimming down the hurrying river of time, whose mysterious reaches, stretching limitlessly behind,

glimmer suddenly into view with these wracks washed on to the stilted shores'.²⁴² But this is ruin as spectacle, and as such the ruin is at a distance; a consciousness of passing time has been triggered, but it is also safely contained. In Macaulay's London the decay and attendant overgrowth that are so evocative of passing time are, like the creeping vegetable of 'A Small World', present and active; ruination is a tangible, disturbing reality, not an entertaining attraction. The novel conveys the proximity of ruination – its ever-presentness – by setting up a tension between order and disorder, between the rational, mapped city and the encroaching, chaotic jungle. This tension is present in the contradiction expressed by the phrase 'a wilderness of little streets'. The streets of a city – peopled, ordered – should be the opposite, or rather the absence, of a wilderness. But Macaulay presents these opposites as simultaneous – layered one on top of the other. And it is not always clear which covers which. The human city of buildings and commerce is overrun by a victorious jungle which 'waved its gaudy banners over the ruin of defeated business men', while 'greenery sprawled' into the broken windows of 'gaping shells' (pp.56-57).

As with Bowen's image of trees 'growing in' at the windows of wrecked houses, established human society and its sacrosanct spaces are under threat, but from a vegetable chaos rather than a debased culture, and the book closes with an image of the wilderness's domination over the broken buildings: 'the jungle pressed in on them, seeking to cover them up' (p.254). However, the city is under threat not only from a creeping wasteland, but also from 'the irremediable barbarism that comes up from the depth of the earth' (p.129). The past is figured not as a safe, sustaining heritage but as a threatening presence – not passed but lurking beneath the ruined streets, encroaching on the present just as the jungle encroaches on the city. So down amongst the Roman stones with the deserters and the spivs is a fantastical menagerie: 'the lion and the lizard keep the courts where merchants gloried' and 'the wild ass stamps, the wild cats scream' (p.183). A pre-human past lingers still, and even the human history there buried cannot offer comfort to a beleaguered present; all will return to 'peddling and piracy again', to chaotic, criminal roots – a world anathema to Sir Gulliver Deniston, Barbary's father and the novel's arbiter of civilised propriety. Indeed, as he observes, the ground has already shifted; when Barbary notes the pervasive criminality she has encountered amongst the other ruin-

²⁴² Macaulay, *The Pleasure of Ruins*, p.xvi.

dwellers he replies, 'But it's something rather new for people brought up like you to steal. That's come on since the war, I think' (p.134). The City's illustrious history offers no defence against this debased, criminal market. Although 'the ghosts of the centuries-old merchant cunning' remain, 'their companion ghosts, ghosts of an ancient probity [...] had deserted and fled without trace' (p.159). This is commerce without the check of civility. Everything passes, but chaos is waiting beneath the streets.

In November 1949 *The Spectator* printed a piece by Macaulay entitled 'In the Ruins', and the similarities and differences between this text and *The World My Wilderness* will serve to highlight the central importance of Barbary's psychological perspective to the novel's presentation of the ruins. Like the novel, 'In the Ruins' describes a journey through the City's bombsites, and it is similarly compilatory, listing the space's flora and the identity of the ruined buildings that were now covered by it. It even lifts chunks of text straight from *The World My Wilderness*, and in particular from the passage which describes Barbary's return to the wilderness following her abortive holiday to Scotland. There are a few small differences in the wording of this passage between the two texts, and these alterations denote a shift in emphasis from one to the other – from the universal in the article, to the personal in the novel. For example, whereas in the article the wilderness 'receives us into dwellings with a wrecked, indifferent calm'²⁴³, in the novel it 'received the returned traveller' instead (p.129). Thus when, in the article, the wilderness 'speaks' – 'Here, its cliffs and chasms and caves seem to say, is your home; here you belong; you cannot get away'²⁴⁴ – it is the reader who is being addressed, whereas the same line in the novel (the only change being a shift into the past tense) encompasses only Barbary (p.129). Her own particular wartime experience – fighting in the Resistance, her tacit involvement in her stepfather's murder – is substituted for the general; where the article reads, 'here is the irremediable barbarism that comes up from the depth of the earth'²⁴⁵, the novel has: 'here *you find* the irremediable barbarism that comes up from the depth of the earth, and that *you have known elsewhere*' (p.129) [my emphases]. In both texts chaos lurks beneath the ruined street, but in the novel a young girl has found a home – something recognisable, something appropriate –

²⁴³ Rose Macaulay, 'In the Ruins', *The Spectator*, 18 Nov 1949, pp.660-1.

²⁴⁴ *Ibid.*

²⁴⁵ *Ibid.*

here, and her relationship to the ruins is key to the way in which the novel seeks to address the 'post-war'. At the level of the universal *The World My Wilderness* registers an ever-nearing, vegetable chaos. But at the level of the individual, of the single life, there exists the possibility of finding, as Barbary does even among the chaos of the ruins, a 'spiritual home' (p.57).

The wilderness is for Barbary, as well as Raoul, both a literal hideout and a psychological haven. Upon arriving in London, geographically displaced from a cherished domestic space, theirs is an agonising experience: 'Urged by a desperate nostalgia, they could barely endure the meaningless grey city streets, the dull, respectable, smoke-dark houses' (p.50). They find refuge in the wilderness because it is so like the wild, damaged landscape through which they moved with the Resistance; it is 'natural to them' (p.52) – the bombsites are, in Raoul's words, 'chez nous' (p.181). Yet this familiarity, this sense of belonging, is a source of pain and anxiety as well as comfort. Barbary's interactions with the ruins are perpetually informed by her experiences during the war, and specifically the fear and guilt that such memories engender. Musing upon the similarities between the wilderness and the French forests in which the Maquis would meet, Barbary conjures up mental images of

wandering, sinister, lurking things of night. For it was there, surely, that such beings would foregather, as they had foregathered in the Forêt behind Collioure, the uneasy fringe that hung about the Resistance, committed by their pasts to desperate deeds (p.61).

The ruins become expressive of Barbary's guilt, of the inescapability of her past. Lyndsey Stonebridge suggests that 'Barbary suffers because she cannot find a context in which to make her war guilt meaningful'.²⁴⁶ Barbary's guilt may not be *purposeful*, it cannot help her to reconcile her wartime experiences with her post-war life in London, but it is certainly *meaningful*. She is absolutely clear that her part in the war can mean one thing only: damnation and an eternity in hell. Her conclusions may lack a certain earthly logic, but Macaulay shows that Barbary experiences a very real terror at the thought of divine judgement. In a prophetic foreshadowing of her later injuries, Barbary observes amongst the ruins 'a deep chasm [...] a pit into

²⁴⁶ Lyndsey Stonebridge, *The Writing of Anxiety: Imagining Wartime in Mid-Century British Culture* (Hampshire and New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), p.96. Stonebridge argues that the novel 'laments a universal guilt, but ultimately remains in the dark as to what to do about it' (p.99).

which unbelievers fell and lay without hope' (p.78). Her encounter with the mentally disturbed Father Roger, preaching of an inescapable torment, only serves to confirm her beliefs (p.167). Here the text explicitly links both Barbary and Raoul's memory and guilt with images of a rather medieval hell, as they look 'with oblique distaste, unto the dark pits of the past, from which anguished screams arose. Like Father Roger, they, too, knew about hell' (p.169). In these instances, and elsewhere in the text, the children's fear of their past, their 'war guilt', is *spatialised*: it is externalised, located in, and manifested through the ruins: the 'pits' and 'chasms' that appear in this broken architecture. Even when Barbary has left the ruins following her fall and is convalescing in her father's house, her feverish half-waking visions of laying traps with the Resistance and being pursued by the Gestapo transport her back, not to France, but to the wilderness, where 'she lay trapped deep in ruins, fearing death, fearing hell, trying in agony to repent and be saved' (p.227). Barbary has sought out the ruins, but they also exert a powerful pressure on her.

The World My Wilderness is a novel of fragments, and not just the fragmented spaces of the ruins, but of textual, modernist fragments too. I will go on to consider the role of the literary fragment in the novel shortly, but I want first to turn to another instance in which the modernist fragment was brought to bear upon the ruins. It was while on her trip to Europe that Macaulay began to think seriously about the experiencing of ruins – viewing them, moving through them – as a way to confront the griefs of a post-war world, and in that same year the artist John Piper was concerned with what he termed 'pleasing decay'.²⁴⁷ In an article of the same name he deals largely with questions pertaining to heritage and the restoration of aging architecture, and argues, as the title suggests, for the aesthetic value of weathered, crumbling buildings. However, the article does turn briefly to ruins and their relationship to post-war reconstruction. As with the City church ruins proposal, Piper addresses the possibility of using bombsite ruins in reconstruction, but proposes that they might perform a less literal function as 'a rich source of information for the planner' during that process, rather than having a material role as fragments to be retained and incorporated.²⁴⁸ He also identifies what he considers to be another significant touchstone for post-war planners: modernist art. He calls for

²⁴⁷ Feigel, *The Love-Charm of Bombs*, p.434; John Piper, 'Pleasing Decay', in *Buildings and Prospects* (The Architectural Press: London, 1948), pp.89-116. Originally published in *The Architectural Review*, 1947.

²⁴⁸ Piper, 'Pleasing Decay', p.99.

‘[t]he incorporation of Picasso and Matisse, Ernst and Miro into our visual philosophy’, and argues that the conditions of the war itself necessitate such a turn towards modernist forms: ‘They prophesied the beauty as well as the horror of bomb damage, and as visual planners they are at the moment unrivalled’.²⁴⁹ So, just as ruins have an important role to play in reconstruction on account of their capacity to communicate something of the reality of the war, so too the forms – in Piper’s words the ‘texture’ – of modernist painting.²⁵⁰

Piper had a personal stake in the matter of bringing modernism to bear on the ruins, having employed modernist forms in some of the works he completed on commission for the WAAC, most famously his paintings of the ruined Coventry Cathedral, made the morning after it was bombed in 1940. These works are an affirmation in paint of Piper’s later assertion that modernist art predicted something of the aesthetic beauty of the war’s ruins – or rather that they gave artists the tools to aestheticise those same ruins. In blending documentary recording with geometric abstraction they register the newly dislocated spaces of the bombed cathedral. *Interior of St Michael’s Cathedral, Coventry, November 15th 1940* (1940), for example, combines flat, smooth slabs of colour with scratched, speckled, and blurred layers of paint to convey a sense of the building’s fragmentation, breaking it down into its various smashed, fire-scorched parts.

In common with the proponents of the City church ruins, Piper advocated that reconstruction should take account of ruination, and that just as modernist forms provided a way in which to view and to paint the newly-made ruins of the Blitz, so might they provide the tools to confront those same ruins in the context of a post-war world. Basil Spence’s new Coventry Cathedral (begun in 1955 and consecrated in 1962) seems an example of this principle put into practice. Piper’s paintings of its predecessor’s ruins became a focal point for discussions about the new building when a competition was launched to find a suitable replacement in 1951,²⁵¹ and Spence’s design incorporated the fragmentary ruins of the old cathedral. (Piper was also to later play a more active role in the cathedral’s reconstruction by designing the Baptistry window.) In using rather than clearing away the ruins, Wiebe suggests, the project achieved something of the spirit of the City church ruins proposal:

²⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, p.99.

²⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, p.99.

²⁵¹ Frances Spalding, ‘John Piper and Coventry, in War and Peace’, *The Burlington Magazine*, vol.145 (July, 2003), 488-500 (p.493).

Like the imagined memorials of *Bombed Churches*, the cathedral retained a concern for remnants of the past as part of its memorial function, in constant tension with the desire to absorb these traces into a forward-looking narrative of renewal and hope.²⁵²

The new cathedral incorporated two fragments: the material fragment of the ruin and the more elemental fragment that was Piper's previous artistic engagement with that same ruin. It harnessed both to create a new whole, but one that spoke of past destruction as well as present reconstruction.

Macaulay's use of pre-war fragments in constructing her post-war text is, like Piper's, *necessary*. The fragment – broken, partial – is the given material out of which the text must be moulded. In turning from the architectural fragments of Coventry to the literary fragments of *The World My Wilderness* I want to focus on T.S. Eliot's *The Waste Land*, a text that appears repeatedly through the novel, and in particular on two significant occasions. These are Barbary's aforementioned return to the ruins after journeying back from Scotland, and Richie's walk through the ruins at the very end of the novel. In both instances Eliot's words are appropriated, spoken by another voice in Macaulay's text – metaphorically in the former and more literally in the latter – and used by those voices to speak about the ruins. In the former a fragment of Eliot's poem is used as one half of a metaphorical communication between Barbary and the wasteland:

'What are the roots that clutch, what branches grow, out of this stony rubbish? Son of man, you cannot say, or guess...' But you can say, you can guess, that it is you yourself, your own roots, that clutch the stony rubbish, the branches of your own being that grow from it and from nowhere else (p.129).

Macaulay both answers and refutes Eliot here, in an affirmation of the wilderness's agency, of its power over Barbary. As Feigel has suggested, Macaulay's use of *The Waste Land* enacts a shift from metaphor to actuality, from a time when London was a ruin in the poetic imagination only, to a time when its wastelands were real and present.²⁵³ The war has engendered a terrible, intimate familiarity with such damaged spaces and the acts that produce them. Now 'you can say' – the war has

²⁵² Wiebe, *Britten's Unquiet Past*, pp.205-206.

²⁵³ Feigel, *The Love-Charm of Bombs*, p.441.

furnished Barbary with an awful knowledge, and this knowledge binds her to the spaces of the wilderness. Leo Mellor has argued that Macaulay's use of this particular fragment makes room for a 'human presence' within the chaos of the ruins, creating 'a symbiosis of material and human debris, each reliant on the other'; and that '[a] lamentation is spun into an affirmation of life as the bombsite Maquis. It is a positivist answer of sorts'. In this reading the novel's fragmentary, modernist form is a strategy for reconstruction, a 'technique of *bricolaging*' that serves to 'make sense of' the post-war moment, and to offer consolation. It is a strategy that demonstrates 'a faith in the restorative and the insightful power of literature'.²⁵⁴ Yet such a reading does not make space for the sense of the wilderness's agency within the novel, for the irremediable barbarism that lies in wait for all beneath the ruins and for the stony rubbish that nurtures Barbary's being. The novel undoubtedly finds value in the brokenness of the space, but fragmentation is not so much a strategy as a stark reality – an effect of the ruins. It is as if, surrounded by a ruined wilderness, the space leaves both characters and author with little to do but pick through the wreckage. And although she finds a kind of redemption in the wilderness, a temporary home that she can recognise as her own, Barbary only finds true comfort in being returned to her mother. The wilderness may come to stand for and to perpetuate her war guilt, but it also permits her to escape the civilised, suffocating propriety of Sir Gulliver for a time. By the end of the novel this escape is permanent; this is what returning to her mother, Helen, means for Barbary. As Helen herself notes, reflecting on the noble world that Sir Gulliver occupies, 'I suppose I couldn't breathe in it...and certainly Barbary couldn't' (p.250).

Only a few lines from the novel's close Richie, walking through the ruins, murmurs another line from *The Waste Land*: 'I think [...] we are in rats' alley, where the dead men lost their bones' (p.253). In the context of the rest of the novel it seems strange that Richie should be the one to make this final journey, and the effect is quite jarring. Unlike his sister, Richie is at odds with the wilderness – while Barbary makes her home there, he shudders at the sight of it (p.253). Moreover, he is consistently ironised by Macaulay. When first he appears Macaulay describes his 'delighted reaction towards the exquisite niceties of civilisation', pleasures that are set up in stark contrast to the 'messy, noisy and barbaric war' (p.21). Immediately

²⁵⁴ Mellor, *Reading the Ruins*, p.193.

following the establishment of this binary comes a heavily ironised description of Richie's political persuasion. Macaulay writes of 'his disdain for the common man', for the 'philistine, vocal army terrible with slogans, illiterate cries, and destructive levelling aims', a section of society entirely at odds with 'the amenities of wealth and comfort' (p.21).²⁵⁵ So Richie lumps 'the common man' and his political voice in with the barbarism of war, staking a claim for himself and others like him as arbiters of civilisation. The implication is that the binary that Richie has co-opted as a sort of moral compass is contingent upon his political (and perhaps even party political) ideology; he later tells Helen, 'I'm a Tory, you know' (p.25). Moreover, his religious views are also very much shaped by his politics; when asked, 'Are you religious?' by Helen he replies, 'Not yet. But I might go Catholic, all the same. I like their traditionalism; their high Toryism' (p.29). Richie finds himself drawn to Catholicism because it chimes with his notion of propriety, with that which he has deemed to be civilised.

Richie invests a great deal in this binary, telling Barbary, 'So I have grown up a civilised being, and you, so far, have not. It is to be doubted if you ever will' (p.33). It is the framework through which he defines both himself and others, yet there is also a distinct lack of depth to his convictions; they are merely cosmetic, in much the same vein as his love of 'mulled claret drunk in decorative rooms lit by tall candles' (p.21). What is more, Richie shows himself to be as susceptible to the descent into partial criminality that was endemic during the war and its immediate aftermath as anyone else. '*I cheat freely*' [emphasis in the original], he tells his mother, in acknowledgement of how moral boundaries shifted during the conflict, 'It became the right thing to do' (p.92). Thus the text undermines Richie's self-appointed position as defender of civilisation (in a way that it does not undermine Sir Gulliver's), presenting a young man who is compromised in his ethical judgements – although, significantly, Richie and others like him receive no censure for their behaviour, except from Sir Gulliver. Richie's presentation throughout the novel is important, because it is the context in which the closing pages must be read.

Macaulay, in a letter to her friend and confidant Father Johnson, wrote, 'I'm glad too that you saw the religious motif in [*The World My*] *Wilderness*. To me it was important. But of course most readers don't see such things, they are too busy

²⁵⁵ Plain has noted how this aspect of Richie's character 'evokes the preoccupations of *Brideshead Revisited*'. *Literature of the 1940s*, p.195.

with other aspects'.²⁵⁶ Penelope Fitzgerald saw Richie as playing a central role in the novel's religious concerns, and suggested that his climactic journey across the ruined wilderness is comparable to *The Waste Land's* 'fitful quest for spiritual healing', arguing that '[t]his is one of several hints in the book of a religious solution, or, at least, of curiosity about one'.²⁵⁷ Thus, for Fitzgerald, Richie's journey symbolises what is at the very least the beginnings of a process that will rehabilitate the post-war world through a rediscovery of God's place in it. While there is undoubtedly a religious motif in the novel, it is a religion that fails to offer redemption, that rather operates as the prism through which Barbary views her war guilt. If redemption is to be found at all then it most certainly should not be sought in the conventions of figures such as Richie. As Stonebridge argues, the novel 'finds redemption [...] in the stony rubbish of the post-war wilderness itself'.²⁵⁸ It is in the very barbarity, the brokenness of the space that Barbary finds redemption – however partial or unconsolatory – because it is within the ruins that she finds a redemptive correlative of her own fragmented experience. So it is surely appropriate that the novel should close with the wilderness itself, but strange that Richie, who is so antithetical to the spirit of the ruins, should appear as the sole figure in this landscape. Moreover, not only does he appear at the text's conclusion, but he is our intermediary. Macaulay's narration is laced with his voice, with his notions of civility and propriety: the wilderness is described as 'a symbol of loathsome things, war destruction, savagery; an earnest, perhaps, of the universal doom that stalked, sombre and menacing, on its way' (p.252). Unlike his sister, Richie sees nothing of himself in this ruined space, and Eliot's text, having previously served to express something of the redemptive potential of the wilderness – of an affinity between damaged child and damaged city – now expresses a distaste for that same space. However, at this late stage, it is impossible for us to read Richie's as the authentic voice of the text, ironised and marginalised as he is. Perhaps Deborah Parsons is right in reading Richie's presence here as a tacit acknowledgement by Macaulay that it is his views and values 'that will prosper and overcome' in a post-war world, just as they did in a pre-war

²⁵⁶ Rose Macaulay, *Letters to a Friend*, ed. by Constance Babington Smith (London: Collins, 1961), p.50.

²⁵⁷ Penelope Fitzgerald, Introduction to *The World My Wilderness*, pp. vii-xiv (p.xiii)

²⁵⁸ Stonebridge, *The Writing of Anxiety*, p.96.

world,²⁵⁹ but it cannot undermine the place of the wilderness within the text. What it does do is destabilise it. Ultimately Macaulay ends with another fragment – partial, unrepresentative, offering no real resolution, and, perhaps in that sense, true to the ‘questionable chaos’ of the ruins themselves (p.254).

Playing In the Ruins: Graham Greene and Rumer Godden

In October 1940, while the Blitz – and indeed the war more generally – was still in its relative infancy, Graham Greene wrote a short essay entitled ‘At Home’. In it he describes a world in decline – ‘an old dog-toothed civilisation’ breaking apart.²⁶⁰ What is more, the decline is not occasioned by the newly-intensified conflict, but rather the conflict itself is the product of an inevitable, pre-ordained decline:

The world we lived in could not have ended any other way. The curious waste lands one sometimes saw from trains – the cratered ground round Wolverhampton under a cindery sky with a few cottages grouped like stones among the rubbish: those acres of abandoned cars round Slough: the dingy fortune-teller’s on the first-floor above the cheap permanent waves in a Brighton back street; they all demanded violence.²⁶¹

Those values – ‘sanctity and fidelity’, ‘faith’ – which ‘belong with old college buildings and cathedrals’ had been replaced by the brooding ‘waste lands’ of the modern world, heralding the catastrophe of war. And not only heralding, but ushering it in. The violence was ‘long expected – not only by the political sense but by the moral sense’.²⁶² Like Macaulay, Greene identifies a universal decline, and a space or spaces that both stand for and enact that decline.

‘The Destructors’ (published in 1954) is set in a space similarly stark and modern as those which Greene describes in ‘At Home’ – ‘an impromptu car-park’ – except that it is a space produced by the war – ‘the site of the last bomb of the first

²⁵⁹ Deborah L. Parsons, *Streetwalking the Metropolis: Women, the City and Modernity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), p.193.

²⁶⁰ Greene, ‘At Home’, p.336.

²⁶¹ *Ibid.*, p.334.

²⁶² *Ibid.*, p.334.

blitz’ – and transformed through common usage.²⁶³ In this post-war wasteland stands Old Misery’s ‘crippled house’, a lone survivor of the bombs (p.10). Led by T., the Wormsley Common gang destroys the house ‘from inside [...] like worms [...] in an apple’ (p.12). The children are like ‘a hive in swarm’ (p.14), like agents of an accelerated process of natural decay. But, particularly given the assertions of ‘At Home’, it is hard not to see them also as instruments of a moral decline that extends beyond the realms of the merely criminal. If war was a moral inevitability, then this is a continuation of that destructive conflict – in Richard Kelly’s words, ‘a logical conclusion [to] the levelling of European civilisation wrought by Hitler’s army’. The Wren-built house is, like St Paul’s towering above the flames during the Blitz, ‘a symbol of civilisation’, and its destruction is a triumph for barbarism.²⁶⁴ Indeed, T. is keen to distance the gang’s actions from petty criminality: when he finds a stash of pound notes he asserts, ‘We aren’t thieves’, and burns them. Likewise he refuses to justify the destruction of the house in logical terms, criminal or otherwise. When Blackie, the gang’s erstwhile leader, suggests to T. that he must be motivated by a powerful hatred for Old Misery, T. replies, ‘Of course I don’t hate him [...] There’d be no fun if I hated him [...] All this hate and love [...] it’s soft, it’s hooey. There’s only things, Blackie’ (p.16). The children’s destructive endeavours transcends the petty and the personal, but it is far removed also from a vegetable chaos, from the creeping wilderness. This destruction is human – motivated by a human will. It is the result of careful ‘organisation’, a complex, multifaceted process carried out with ‘a sense of great urgency’ (p.14). It is *planned* – it is an architectural kind of destruction, and thus Greene’s story speaks, however obliquely, to the moment of reconstruction out of which it was written.

T. and the bombsite are, respectively, types of the architect and the city in miniature. T.’s father is ‘a former architect and present clerk’, and it is he who informed his son that Old Misery’s house was the work of Christopher Wren (pp.9-10). The boy appreciates the architectural merits of the house, having been given a tour by the owner himself, and he tells the others, ‘It’s a beautiful house. [...] It’s got a staircase two hundred years old like a corkscrew. [...] It’s to do with opposite forces, Old Misery said’ (p.11). The house itself, as already suggested, is a type of St

²⁶³ Graham Greene, ‘The Destructors’, in *Collected Short Stories* (London: Penguin, 1986), pp.9-22 (p.9). Subsequent references to this edition are given in parentheses within the main body of the text. Originally published in the collection *Twenty-One Stories* in 1954.

²⁶⁴ Richard Kelly, *Graham Greene: A Study of the Short Fiction* (New York: Twayne, 1992), p.37.

Paul's Cathedral, standing undefeated in the bombed wastelands of the City. Within this setting the gang undertake a kind of inverse programme of reconstruction. Given the exact same conditions on a microcosmic scale as those which confront the city at large, they choose to flatten the space rather than to build it back up again. Simply put, destruction is really the only option available to them; lacking the ability to build, this is the only mark they can make upon the space. But, even though the end result of their actions is the opposite of reconstruction's goals in a material sense, it is, Greene suggests, in essence comparable. Kelly argues that, 'Trevor has acquired his father's keen sense of architectural splendour, but paradoxically his reaction to beauty is destructive'.²⁶⁵ There is, indeed, a paradox at the heart of the gang's endeavour: '[T]hey worked with the seriousness of creators – and destruction after all is a form of creation. A kind of imagination had seen this house as it had now become' (p.15). But this paradox is not disruptive; T. is not the opposite of his architect father. Instead two opposites are collapsed together. The boys are, simultaneously, destructors *and* creators, and, in any case, by the story's end their project has come to feel more like a childish joke than the symptom of a general moral decline.

Greene himself could sympathise with his protagonists' glee for demolition, and the gang's enthusiastic destruction of Old Misery's home and possessions registers more than a little of Greene's own experience of destruction during the war. His house was hit and gutted during the Blitz, and his biographer Norman Sherry suggests that Greene felt a 'sense of freedom' following the event. Moreover, Sherry argues that Greene's response to the destruction of his own home is explored in 'The Destructors', the story 'reflect[ing] Greene's partiality for the anarchy and violence released by the war'. Greene's wife Vivien certainly thought this was the case, and, recognising her home in the story – like Old Misery's, the Greens' Queen Anne house was attributed to Wren – she was deeply upset.²⁶⁶ Greene's own personal enjoyment of destruction, then, is perhaps behind the story's somewhat slapstick conclusion, ending, as it does, with the lorry driver who was the final, unwitting agent of the house's destruction, unable to keep himself from laughing at the sight of a house that 'had stood there with such dignity between the bomb-sites like a man in

²⁶⁵ Kelly, *Graham Greene*, p.35.

²⁶⁶ Norman Sherry, *The Life of Graham Greene, Volume 2: 1939-1955* (London: Penguin, 2004), pp.64-67.

a top hat, and then, bang, crash, there wasn't anything left – not anything' (p.22). This post-war destruction feels bathetic – a comic coda to the tragic destruction of the Blitz; children in the bombsites playing at creating and destroying.

In both 'The Destructors' and *The World My Wilderness* the worlds of childhood and adulthood intersect; play tips over into 'real life' – it has real consequences. Moreover, this play takes place in the volatile space of the bombsites; the topological by-product of violence, these are still dangerous places, as Barbary's injuries attest. But they are also liminal spaces, stuck between destruction and reconstruction, and adults have no need to enter them, except to escape the law. They are thus the natural environment for a very un-child-like kind of play, both facilitating and engendering it. In 'The Destructors' the gap between the childish and the adult grows ever narrower until it is closed completely in the climactic moment of the house's destruction, in which play has turned to demolition, and demolition is described as play. For Barbary and Raoul this gap has already been closed by their formative experiences with the Resistance. Play is war. Arriving in London's ruins, they instinctively act out the same life-preserving games as they did in Collioure, having 'learnt to look for and find cover everywhere' (p.56). Thus there is a sense in both texts that these children have been deprived of a childhood – that the adult world has imposed itself too early. When moved to rage, T., we are told, 'protested with the fury of the child he had never been' (p.17). Greene leaves this line hanging, the knowledge that T.'s father had 'come down in the world' being perhaps the only hint at some kind of trauma in T.'s life (p.9). In the case of Barbary and Raoul the cause of this premature adulthood is far clearer: both fought as part of the Resistance and are implicated in murder, while Barbary has been the victim of sexual violence. The war has permitted adult pain, suffering and anxiety to encroach upon childhood. This kind of play is part of the legacy of the war for these children; it is part of the condition of being a post-war child in an as-yet-unreconstructed world.

Lovejoy, the central character in Rumer Godden's novel *An Episode of Sparrows* (published in 1955), also plays in the bombsites, making a garden for herself amongst the ruined buildings. Like Barbary, Lovejoy too pines for an absent mother, but is able to find solace in the space she has made for herself: 'At night now, when she went to bed, she did not lie awake feeling the emptiness; she thought

about the garden, the seeds, their promised colours'.²⁶⁷ That garden is soon destroyed by Tip Malone and his gang (pp.95-97), but, driven by guilt, Tip finds Lovejoy a new patch of land to tend in the graveyard of the ruined Roman Catholic church, hidden from view by the church's temporary, pre-fabricated replacement (pp.107-108). Lovejoy is distraught when she finds out that this too will be destroyed when the church comes to be rebuilt (p.228), but, of all the children in these texts, there is perhaps the least at stake for Lovejoy. She steals in order to make her garden – first seeds, then money from the church's collection box to buy tools, and finally soil from the shared, but exclusive, garden in the middle-class Square. Like Barbary she feels guilty, and articulates this feeling through Catholic iconography, convincing herself that the statue of Our Lady in the church will take retribution (p.119). But these petty crimes are nothing compared to destroying a home, or taking a life. What is under threat – and is ultimately destroyed – is her own personal stake in reconstruction: the garden sanctuary she has built for herself – her own corner of the ruins.

Philip Tew suggests that 'Lovejoy's abandonment, her independence and resilience offer ways of reading post-war Britain and its potential renewal', and that she is 'an image of the nation's ideological radicalisation'.²⁶⁸ Lovejoy is certainly hopeful when she embarks upon the project of making her garden, and she goes about it with the radical enthusiasm of someone doing something they love. But, crucially, her endeavours are thwarted by the progress of London's actual reconstruction. Moreover – and in common with a growing trend in reconstruction after the Conservative victory in 1951²⁶⁹ – this is not the result of a government-led, ideologically radical reconstruction, but of privately-funded rebuilding (p.288). Yet, in spite of Lovejoy's sadness, the novel does close with an image of natural, cyclical rebirth. Inspecting the site of the soil theft in the Square's garden one resident exclaims, 'The funny thing is that the holes are closing up; we didn't do anything, they're closing themselves, making new earth. Don't ask me how [...] because I don't know' (p.247). The slightly fantastical element here is strangely at odds with

²⁶⁷ Rumer Godden, *An Episode of Sparrows* (New York: The Viking Press, 1955), p.80. Subsequent references to this edition are given in parentheses within the main body of the text.

²⁶⁸ Philip Tew, 'Childhood, Longing, Sexuality, Violence and Sacrifice in Rumer Godden's *The River*, *An Episode of Sparrows* and *The Greengate Summer*', in *Rumer Godden: International and Intermodern Storyteller*, ed. by Lucy Le-Guilcher and Phyllis B. Lassner (Farnham: Ashgate, 2010), pp.135-146 (pp.141-142).

²⁶⁹ Powers, *Britain*, p.127.

the realism of the rest of the novel, but it projects a hopeful future that moves beyond personal loss.

In the immediate post-war moment architects understood reconstruction as the means to a collective recovery from the crisis of the war and its social, spiritual, psychological and material impact. For many practitioners and commentators, planning was the key, and not just the planning of areas that were to be rebuilt, but a planned reorganisation of social relations and conditions through the establishment of a welfare state. Thus, it was felt, the aim of reconstruction was not a return to pre-war conditions, but an opportunity to recognise and correct the mistakes (social and political as well as architectural) of the past. There was, of course, disagreement as to what this new future should look like, and debate often centred around what part the past would have to play in it, but there was also a broad consensus as to the need for *something* that was new, and in this the architectural profession reflected the public mood. In contrast, for the writers I have considered in the course of this chapter, reconstruction itself was a kind of crisis. For Waugh – as well as for Bowen – it was a political and, primarily, a cultural crisis, and although *Brideshead*'s religious conclusion stops short of offering the past as a remedy against a seemingly inevitable future, Waugh does, in his celebration of fading grandeur, identify an alternative to the crisis, even if it is now too late. The other writers do not offer a way out. In these texts the past lingers and, unlike in *Brideshead*, it is precisely this past that is threatening, destructive. Macaulay hints at the possibility of a kind of recovery, of redemption in the ruins; but it is an uncertain, volatile process. For Greene and Godden the ruins are not so recent, and their young protagonists, creating and destroying in the bombsites, cannot remember the bombs that made them. Godden seems ultimately hopeful, and Greene finds a kind of release in the chaos of the ruins, but both texts are far-removed from the radical enthusiasm of the architects and planners, reflecting, perhaps, the fact that popular enthusiasm for reconstruction was already dwindling a decade after the war's conclusion. For Greene and Godden, in common with Waugh and Macaulay, the notion that reconstruction could adequately address the crisis of the war, as well as of the post-war, seemed remote and improbable, even impossible.

4. Writing Reconstruction's 'Failure', 1955-1975

In December 1967 *The Observer* published an article by Michael Frayn entitled 'Prospects for The Flat'. Frayn's subject was 'the high-rise flats which are so generally execrated at the moment'.²⁷⁰ His choice of words was certainly apt – during the late-1960s high-rise blocks were, and indeed have since continued to be, viewed in the popular imaginary as an accursed architectural form, doomed to failure – yet Frayn predicts their rehabilitation with the passing of time. We inevitably, he surmises, hanker after what we have just given up:

Our running socio-architectural legend is the modern version of the Expulsion from the Garden; except that it's even more tantalising, since the lost paradise trails only just behind us, a sort of creeping Eden which instantly transforms what appeared when we were passing through it to be entirely barren desert.

Frayn, tongue firmly in cheek, traces this tendency back to the inhabitants of thatched roof cottages pining for the recently abandoned 'freedom of the forest', then on to their descendants, nostalgic for those same cottages once they had themselves become ensconced in the dense urban centres produced by the Industrial Revolution. Next suburbanites, driven out to the edges of the city by the 'insanitary, inhuman' conditions, long to return, and '[s]o back they traipse out of the suburban sprawl, to a marvellous new life in highly concentrated urban communities, packed into starkly urban towers looking out over pubs, cooling-towers, used car lots, and other romantic urbanisms', only to find that 'scarcely have they got the lace curtains up than the buildings are driving them all to delinquency and prostitution, etc., etc.'. ²⁷¹ Generation after generation, Frayn suggests, come to condemn the spaces that they inhabit, and specifically to condemn the psychological effects of those spaces; the high-rise produces unsavoury behaviour, the suburbs breed 'loneliness, delinquency and despair', and the cities of the Industrial Revolution are 'productive of nothing but misery and crime'. ²⁷² The high-rise may yet remain unrehabilitated, but, in spite of its parodic tone, something of Frayn's account rings true. It is indicative of a narrative of failure that took hold in Britain during the decades following the conclusion of the Second World War.

²⁷⁰ Michael Frayn, 'Prospects for the Flat', *The Observer*, 1 December 1967, p.9.

²⁷¹ *Ibid.*

²⁷² *Ibid.*

Post-war architecture, it was argued by the popular press, architects and writers alike, had ‘failed’. Sometimes it was considered to have failed aesthetically, sometimes it was a failure of scope and vision that was identified (and, indeed, the nation’s cities rarely came to resemble anything like the comprehensive plans drawn up for them), and sometimes the architecture was a *social* failure – a criticism most frequently levelled at housing. Frayn’s article hits upon this ‘failure’ of domestic architecture, describing the conviction that buildings have a profound impact upon the psychology of those that use them, and that we tend to be most aware of this impact when it is a negative one. People, it was often claimed, were at best unhappy, and at worst psychologically distressed, when living in these new, post-war spaces. Writers were, unsurprisingly, drawn to this theme, and in the course of this chapter I will consider three novels that engage with the notion of a ‘failed’ architecture in the post-war decades: Angus Wilson’s *Late Call* (1964), B.S. Johnson’s *Albert Angelo* (1964) and J.G. Ballard’s *High-Rise* (1975). Between them these texts take in the New Towns, high-rise flat blocks – both of which had their genesis, in Britain at least, during this post-war era, and were consequently a particular focus for this narrative of failure – and a dilapidated, crumbling London that had certainly not received the make-over planners had promised.

My previous chapter ended in 1955 with Godden’s contrasting images of, on the one hand, rebirth and renewal, and on the other childish disappointment. In the wider, national context there was a sense that reconstruction was very much underway, and yet that it had somehow also already begun to stall. Any hope was tentative and contingent. This chapter will pick up the trail nearly a decade later in Wilson’s fictional New Town of Carshall, but in the intervening years much was already being made of reconstruction’s failure. As I noted in my last chapter, the mid-1950s saw a loss of popular enthusiasm for reconstruction, accompanied by a shift in its emphasis. Building controls were lifted and private developers had an increasingly large role to play. A 1955 editorial in *The Architectural Review* met the announcement of an end to licensing with great enthusiasm, but bemoaned the impact that such controls had had thus far:

Since the war architects have been struggling to advance their art under the handicap of an outlook no broader than that afforded by a prison cell with three of its walls labelled schools, housing and

factories and the fourth just allowing a glimpse of a few more glamorous enterprises.²⁷³

Thus the profession, the authors suggested, found itself at a crossroads:

1955 is for modern architecture in Britain a year of challenge. It will show us whether the post-war restrictions have become inhibitions too deep-rooted to be shaken off, or whether the time of waiting has been used to acquire a mastery of principles and techniques that will allow the next steps forward, into the open country beyond the prison walls, to be undertaken with an assured sense of direction.²⁷⁴

However, as I will show in this chapter, the optimism of this moment was short-lived, and a sense of failure was pervasive in the ensuing decades. Indeed, only two years after the publication of the *Review*'s hopeful editorial, J.M. Richards would bemoan the Europe-wide failure of reconstruction.²⁷⁵ This is not to say that everyone deemed every architectural endeavour to have failed all the time – there was often lively debate as to what exactly it was that had failed and how, and even livelier debate as to what should be done about it – but rather that the notion of architecture's 'failure' is a common thread running through the writings of many and diverse figures and groups during the 1950s, 1960s and 1970s.

Although the editors of *The Architectural Review* were happy to declare that the project of post-war reconstruction in Britain had already failed by 1955, from the vantage point of more than half a century later it now seems obvious that it was only just getting going. New Towns and high-rises, those icons of post-war British architecture, were still being planned, built and populated, and many of the most famous examples of each were yet to appear: Runcorn, for example, would not be designated a New Town until 1964, and Milton Keynes not until 1967, while Denys Lasdun's 'cluster block' – Keeling House in Bethnal Green – and the LCC's Alton Estate in Roehampton would not be completed until 1957 and 1959 respectively.²⁷⁶ The years following 1955, then, do not so much constitute a significant break,

²⁷³ Editorial, 'Foreword to Special Preview Issue', *The Architectural Review*, vol. 117 (January, 1955), 5-7 (p.5).

²⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, p.7.

²⁷⁵ J.M. Richards, 'Europe Rebuilt: 1946-56', *The Architectural Review*, vol. 121 (March, 1957), 158-176 (p.159).

²⁷⁶ Anthony Sutcliffe, *London: An Architectural History* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2006), pp.181-182.

architecturally speaking, with what came before as the continuation of certain building trends begun in the immediate post-war years that would keep their momentum until the 1970s: the plans for Milton Keynes were published in March 1970, and the town's new residents did not start to arrive until the middle of the decade, while the vogue for building high-rise housing came to an end at roughly the same time.²⁷⁷ Consequently, the literary texts I will be considering are responding as much to the architectural spaces engendered by the practices of the ten or even twenty years prior to their publication as they are to the moment in which they were written.

My analysis will begin with a reading of Wilson's novel and its presentation of 'New Town Blues' – feelings of dislocation, isolation and boredom often diagnosed in those recently moved to New Towns, not least by the popular press. Next I will return to London with Johnson, and to his account of a dilapidated, unreconstructed city. Finally, I will consider Ballard's account of decadent violence in a high-rise block. In reading these three texts I will examine the ways in which they interact with various narratives of architectural failure, as well as how they represent the relationship between these 'failures' and the personal – between the architectural and the psychological. To this extent they exemplify the kinds of literary uses of architecture that I have been identifying throughout the thesis thus far. All three texts are absolutely engaged with the architecture of their particular moment, and they are all, I will argue, very attentive to the ideas and conversations that were circulating around that architecture, perhaps more so than any of the other literary texts I have offered readings of. But at the same time they also, paradoxically, display a marked disinterest in directly participating in those same conversations. The texts that were the focus of my previous chapters make use of architectural space as a way to engage with other related ideas, themes, questions or controversies. Texts whose scope is ostensibly fairly narrow nevertheless insinuated themselves, consciously or otherwise, into contemporaneous conversations that had considerable coverage and currency. So, for example, the description of one man's retreat to a rural idyll, or of a child's retreat to an urban ruin, pose huge questions

²⁷⁷ Dominic Sandbrook, *State of Emergency: The Way We Were: Britain, 1970-1974* (London: Allen Lane, 2010), p.365; Dominic Sandbrook, *White Heat: A History of Britain in the Swinging Sixties, 1964-70* (London: Little, Brown, 2006), p.598. High-rise housing has returned with a vengeance in recent years in the form of 'luxury' apartments, often replacing redundant industrial architecture or 'failed' social housing. See, for example, developments in London's Docklands and Elephant and Castle.

about post-war recovery; a brief snapshot of a fireman on duty is a meditation on the (im)possibility of recording the destruction wrought by modern warfare; the story of a family and their opulent home articulates an anxiety about shifting social relations in the country at large. In this present chapter the texts' engagement with architecture appears, on the surface, to be much deeper and more concerted; they seem to participate, in Johnson's case, in conversations about the state of London almost twenty years after the bombs had stopped falling, and, in Wilson's and Ballard's, about new types of post-war housing. Yet they also turn their attention inwards. If, broadly speaking, literary texts from previous chapters used individual psychology as way to explore ideas around the construction and inhabitation of architectural space, then these three texts do precisely the opposite.

'Net curtainitis': Angus Wilson and New Town Blues

So certain were the editors of *The Architectural Review* of the central role played by the New Towns in the failure of post-architecture that they were willing to proclaim it prior to the imagined watershed of 1955. In July 1953 Richards's article 'Failure of the New Towns' insisted:

It is a sad moment to have reached when we have to acknowledge the failure of the new towns. But someone must candidly do so, and the politicians are prevented by feelings of loyalty to the administrations that have initiated and maintained them, and the architects and planners by loyalty to an idea which they do not want to appear to turn their backs on however weakly it is being implemented in post-war Britain.²⁷⁸

The failure of the New Towns – and in this article Richards takes the New Towns around London as the basis for his discussion, suggesting that they are 'typical' of the situation of New Towns everywhere except for Scotland and the north-east of England – is a dirty secret that no one else is willing to utter; too many reputations, Richards suggests, have been staked on their success. The New Towns Act of 1946 was motivated by the need to relieve urban centres of their high population densities, and it was hoped that the newly designated settlements would achieve this through a

²⁷⁸ J.M. Richards, 'Failure of the New Towns', *The Architectural Review*, vol. 114 (July, 1953), 29-32 (p.29).

process of ‘planned decentralisation’.²⁷⁹ Richards argues that if the New Towns are to fulfil this role then they must exist as ‘complete communities’, a state he insists they have not yet attained at the time of writing. Being ‘complete’ means ‘providing for all the needs of such a community: housing, shops, schools, industries, hospitals, open spaces and cultural and recreational facilities’. New Towns that do not include such provision run the risk of becoming merely ‘dormitory towns’ – which is to say commuter towns – and while this would serve to relieve the pressure on London’s housing, it would, by failing ‘to check the formless spread of the population that depends on London for its livelihood’, be doing only half the job required of them.²⁸⁰ Thus the New Towns had so far failed to play their proper part in the grand scheme of post-war reconstruction, but they were also, Richards argues, a failure on a more local level. He identifies the ‘psychological’ value of a town that ‘can be seen visibly growing to completeness’, suggesting that only through this growth can it ‘quickly acquire an identity of its own’.²⁸¹

The psychology of the New Towns, then, is here tied up with processes of collective identification, but Richards does not explore the relationship between a lack of collective identity and the lived experience of the individual New Town dweller. Although he suggests that the layout of the New Towns – ‘scattered two-storey dwellings, separated by great spaces’ – leaves inhabitants feeling ‘marooned in a desert of grass verges and concrete roadways’, Richards does not entertain the idea that it is the lack of community that might have the most profoundly negative effect on the individual. By contrast, Gordon Cullen’s ‘Prairie Planning in the New Towns’, published in the same issue of *The Architectural Review* as Richards’s article, does make this leap, and in so doing identifies a key symptom of what would come to be routinely labelled ‘New Town Blues’. Cullen asserts that ‘[o]ne of the essential qualities of a town is that it is a gathering together of people and utilities for the generation of civic warmth’.²⁸² The images that accompany the text hardly suggest warmth – long, barely peopled streets, flanked by rows of identical houses, run into a seemingly endless distance – and this is precisely Cullen’s point. He goes

²⁷⁹ Anthony Alexander, *Britain’s New Towns: Garden Cities to Sustainable Communities* (London and New York: Routledge, 2009), p.17.

²⁸⁰ Richards, ‘Failure of the New Towns’, p.30.

²⁸¹ *Ibid.*, p.30.

²⁸² Gordon Cullen, ‘Prairie Planning in the New Towns’, *The Architectural Review*, vol. 114 (July, 1953), 33-36 (p.34).

on to describe the psychological impact of such a landscape as ‘concentrated isolation’; the New Towns’ architecture generates loneliness.

This is not to suggest that the New Towns were universally proclaimed a failure in the first decades of their existence. Much was made of the improvements in living conditions for those previously housed in urban slums – even Richards, bemoaning the towns’ many faults with one breath, praised the ‘cleaner air, more up-to-date kitchens, space for children to play’ with the next – and of the boost to industry the New Towns provided.²⁸³ Commentators were, as Anthony Alexander suggests, divided along political lines: those on the left were often more willing to celebrate the successes of the programme, while the right was ‘keen to tar the reputation of the New Towns as a failed socialist experiment’.²⁸⁴ The architectural press, though, was less polarised, and its contributors consistently found fault with the New Towns, regardless of their personal politics, although always for a variety of different reasons. The architects Alison and Peter Smithson, for example, who were proclaimed ‘the prophets’ of the New Brutalism by *Architectural Design*, and who most definitely located themselves on the left of the political spectrum, despised the New Towns for being only the most recent realisation of an outmoded way of thinking: the ‘ultimate anti-climax’ of a genealogy stretching back to the Garden City Movement.²⁸⁵ The criticism Martin Pawley levelled at the New Towns in 1971 (also from a piece in *Architectural Design*, an altogether more radical publication than the *Review*) has a less obviously ideological basis: the programme had ‘consumed large areas of usable agricultural land and in its first, crucial twelve years of operation contributed a bare 100,000 housing units to the then national post-war total of just over one million’.²⁸⁶ The New Towns’ failure, Pawley argued, was statistically observable, and on their own terms. These examples, from the Richards piece through to Pawley’s article, are indicative of the scope of the architectural press’ contribution to the discourse around the New Towns, and in particular to the narrative of failure that haunted them. The residents and their experience of this failure were often absent from these accounts. The possible negative psychological impact of the New Towns was either there as a tacit assumption, as in Cullen’s

²⁸³ Richards, ‘Failure of the New Towns’, p.32; Alexander, *Britain’s New Towns*, p.110.

²⁸⁴ Alexander, *Britain’s New Towns*, p.110.

²⁸⁵ Editorial, ‘The New Brutalism’, *Architectural Design*, vol. 25 (January, 1955) 1; Alison and Peter Smithson, ‘The Built World: Urban Reidentification’, *Architectural Design*, vol. 25 (June, 1955), 185-188 (p.185).

²⁸⁶ Martin Pawley, ‘Garbage Housing’, *Architectural Design*, vol. 41 (February, 1971), 86-94 (p.88).

article, or it was lost beneath arguments about architectural merit, or whether the towns had fulfilled this or that quota.

By contrast, popular culture more broadly was deeply interested in the towns' capacity to have an impact upon the mental wellbeing of their inhabitants, and the notion of New Town Blues was taken up by the popular press, television producers, sociologists and medical professionals.²⁸⁷ Quite what that impact was, and whether it was indeed distinct from that of any other settlement of a comparable size, was and remains a moot point. On balance, the more objective verdict seems to have been that it was largely meaningless to think of New Town Blues as a discrete psychological condition. A report published in February 1964 found that '[g]eneral health in the new town is better than elsewhere', and that 'complaints of loneliness and boredom' – symptoms commonly associated with New Town Blues – were no more pronounced here than elsewhere in the country.²⁸⁸ And a number of other surveys conducted during the late-1950s and early-1960s found that residents of New Towns did indeed experience loneliness, boredom and a general dissatisfaction with the places into which they had moved, but frequently concluded that 'any neurotic symptoms manifested by the newcomers could not accurately be ascribed to the new town, but to the general experience of moving house and district'.²⁸⁹ Sociologist H.M. Wirz was even willing, in 1971, to suggest that the condition had been an invention of the popular press: 'As far as the phenomenon called the "new town blues" is concerned, there is some considerable doubt about how far it exists other than as a journalistic catch-phrase'.²⁹⁰

Other accounts of the New Towns' construction and reception, both contemporaneous and subsequent, have suggested that a great number of residents were not only entirely free from New Town Blues, but actually enjoyed the life on offer in these towns, as well as in the equally maligned suburbs. And moreover, as journalist, architectural historian and Labour councillor Nicholas Taylor suggested in 1973, many of those who did not already live there would have liked to.²⁹¹

²⁸⁷ Mark Clapson, *Invincible Green Suburbs, Brave New Towns* (Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 1998), p.146.

²⁸⁸ Our Medical Correspondent, 'No Real Evidence of "New Town Blues"', *The Guardian*, 24 February 1964, p.2.

²⁸⁹ Clapson, *Invincible Green Suburbs, Brave New Town*, p.139.

²⁹⁰ H.M. Wirz, Letter to the Editor, *Social Service Review*, vol. 45 (December, 1971), pp.489-491 (p.489).

²⁹¹ Nicholas Taylor, *The Village in the City* (London: Temple Smith, 1973), pp.19-29.

Somewhat mischievously, Taylor includes architects, who were frequently as dismissive of the suburbs as they were of the New Towns, in his list of suburb-loving Britons, and condemns them for their hypocrisy:

It is an apotheosis of the dishonesty of fashionable architects, who sit all day at their drawing boards in County Hall designing harsh piazzas for Battersea and Bermondsey, and then at 4.51 pm sharp descend to the tube train, roaring out under the forgotten redevelopment areas for which they are responsible, until they come to the surface at their own cosy creeper-hung suburban cottages in Hampstead and Wimbledon.²⁹²

Hampstead and Wimbledon were, of course, rather different to the New Towns, but the suburbs in general are an important touchstone for how attitudes towards the New Towns developed; often lumped together, life in both was assumed to be equally ‘dull and dehumanising’.²⁹³ The New Towns were condemned through their association with suburbia – just one expression of what Mark Clapson calls the ‘extraordinarily pervasive anti-suburban myth in English culture’, the mass diagnosis of New Town Blues being another.²⁹⁴ Consequently, historian Dominic Sandbrook suggests, there was a sizeable gap between how ‘social critics and television producers’ chose to represent life in the New Towns, and the actual experience of those that lived there: ‘Surveys consistently found that most people who moved to New Towns [...] did so with great enthusiasm, and the move usually turned out to be a success’.²⁹⁵

Yet the account of a matron at the community hospital in Crawley New Town tells a somewhat different story. E.C. Ensing wrote of a trauma peculiar to the town’s female occupants:

A new house to go with a job was an obvious attraction, the men often being accompanied by workmates whom they had known in London. For the women the move was more traumatic; newly married, they found themselves confined to the house with small children, far away from mother, aunts and mother-in-law. Despite the fact that they had moved from overcrowded and often

²⁹² *Ibid.*, p.19. Architects, so it was often said, wanted Georgian and Victorian terraces for themselves, and planned estates for everyone else. I will return to this theme in my discussion of *High-Rise*.

²⁹³ Sandbrook, *White Heat*, p.181.

²⁹⁴ Clapson, *Invincible Green Suburbs, Brave New Town*, pp.1 & 121-148.

²⁹⁵ Sandbrook, *White Heat*, p.181.

undesirable environments, 'New Town Blues' were often evident. They missed the friendly and supportive community life of London.²⁹⁶

This suggests that, whatever the cultural and political contingencies of New Town Blues, something of the phenomenon did indeed speak to the lived experience of New Town residents. What is of interest for my purposes here is that the notion of a kind of psychological experience peculiar to the New Towns was very much part of the conversation around these new, post-war spaces – a conversation that Wilson both reflects and participates in through *Late Call*. But in seeing his fictional New Town through the eyes of his protagonist Sylvia Cavert, Wilson moves the conversation beyond the simple question of the existence or otherwise of New Town Blues. Rather than straightforwardly detailing the detrimental effects that New Towns allegedly have on the mental health of their occupants, *Late Call*, I will argue, is interested in how an environment that blends the new and the old, the novel and traditional, might affect someone with an already troubled relationship to their own past and to modernity. What is more, Wilson's novel seems a particularly apt text through which to approach the New Towns. This is in part due to the rarity of fictional accounts of the New Towns – Wilson's own short story 'A Flat Country Christmas' (1957) is another entry in what is a rather short list²⁹⁷ – and this in turn is perhaps why the book plays such a key role in both Sandbrook and Clapson's accounts of the New Towns programme. For both historians it is the perceived psychological veracity of Wilson's text that makes it of such value. Sandbrook writes of Wilson that few of his contemporaries 'were so adept at pointing out the moral weaknesses of modern life', and praises his mimetic qualities as a writer.²⁹⁸ Clapson, meanwhile, posits fiction in general, and *Late Call* in particular, as a way to mitigate the lack of 'detailed retrospective cradle-to-grave life histories', and suggests that Wilson's novel provides one possible way in which to explore the 'transitional neurosis' experienced by those who went to live in the New Towns.

²⁹⁶ E.C. Ensing, 'A Community Hospital', *Medical Care*, vol. 3 (October – December, 1965), pp.204-208 (p.204).

²⁹⁷ The BBC radio serial drama *Mrs Dale's Diary* (1948-1969), which was for a time set in the fictional Exton New Town, is another notable example.

²⁹⁸ Sandbrook, *White Heat*, p.175.

Sylvia Calvert feels profoundly displaced upon arriving in Carshall New Town, and Wilson charts the loneliness and boredom that this sense of displacement generates, as well as Sylvia's eventual 'recovery'. In reading *Late Call* I will consider how this experience is produced by her gender, her age, and her class, paying particular attention to how this is conveyed through her relationship to the spaces of Carshall. Rather than attempt to neatly separate and isolate questions of gender, age and class, I will take them together as a kind of network of influences, as it is frequently the way in which these pressures act upon Sylvia simultaneously that makes her feel out of place.

The Crawley matron's account of New Town Blues identifies it as a gender-, age- and class-specific ailment. The sufferers she describes are working-class women with husbands of working age, often raising young children at home on their own all day, and deprived of established family and community networks. Sylvia's situation is somewhat different. Although from a rural working-class background, she has just retired from a career as a hotel manager, and among the most profound changes to which Sylvia has to adjust upon going to live with her son and grandchildren is no longer having a busy working life. On the morning of her and her husband Arthur's move to Carshall

[s]he had woken to her usual overcrowded day of chores, and she had known a full five minutes of confusion as the day gradually changed into a whole diary of blank pages – her new life. This shifting, swirling prospect had left her quite fuddled.²⁹⁹

Their son Harold is a widower, and Sylvia expects to take on the domestic role that she assumes Harold's late wife Beth had performed, thereby filling the void left by her own work. But these hopes are soon dashed: 'If she could judge from her first morning at "The Sycamores", Sylvia felt that she would never be made use of again' (p.61). She is horrified when her grandson Mark cooks her breakfast, telling him, 'you shouldn't have. A young man cooking for me'. Mark does not reply to her reproach, 'only scowled at her from beneath his fringe – the boy was so odd he quite scared her' (p.63). And she is similarly concerned by the news that her

²⁹⁹ Angus Wilson, *Late Call* (London: Granada, 1982), p.50. Subsequent references to this edition are given in parentheses within the main body of the text.

granddaughter Judy is planning to go to university: 'Sylvia only hoped she wasn't overworking; her little, finely shaped face was very pale' (p.62). Her sense that there are age- and gender-appropriate roles is disturbed by her contact with Harold's children, and she, at least initially, finds their presence unsettling.

Sylvia also feels displaced in class terms. The novel begins with a prologue – 'The Hot Summer of 1911' – in which the principal characters are a young Sylvia (although she is never named as such) and Mrs Longmore, a middle-class visitor to Sylvia's parents' farm. Like the rest of the novel it is narrated in the third person, but is very much from Mrs Longmore's point-of-view, and inflected by her snobbery. Mr Tuffield, Sylvia's father, 'thought no further than his cows and his wheat (or, at any rate, any other thoughts he might have were best not pondered upon)', while Mrs Tuffield 'thought only of doing the house and making tarts' (p.8). The Tuffield children, meanwhile, looked 'sad and listless, and neglected', and little Sylvia, the eldest child, 'had to be mother to the whole brood' (p.9). In the course of the prologue Sylvia tries to follow Mrs Longmore's exhortation to 'feel free' (p.21) by frolicking naked and muddying her clothes. This earns her a beating from her father and her mother's scorn: '*You* wanted to be different! Well, you're nothin'. And you always will be' (p.30). From childhood, then, Sylvia is locked into a particular set of roles (mother then manager) and a particular class identity. She is, in Peter Conradi's words, 'cruelly circumscribed by her gender and background', and her mother's words stay with her into her old age: 'I'm a nobody. I always have been.' (p.128).³⁰⁰ Consequently, she experiences the leisure – luxury, even – afforded her in her new home as a kind of crisis: 'she had too little to do. Harold was making her too comfortable' (p.74). With a kitchen equipped with all the mod cons, a washing machine, central heating, and a family who are all, with the exception of Arthur, expected to chip in with the chores, Sylvia is unable to return to the role she knew in childhood, and that might have given her a new identity in her retirement. She feels this new lack keenly: 'I was a manageress, but I'm nothing now' (p.128). Moreover, Harold's position as headmaster at the local school – a high-status, middle-class profession – means that Sylvia and Arthur are displaced from their own family in class terms; Harold's ideological insistence that 'Carshall must develop its own mixed society – status wise, I mean, nothing to do with class – or it must die of

³⁰⁰ Peter Conradi, *Angus Wilson* (Plymouth: Northcote House, 1997), p.32.

atrophy', belies his own snobbery (p.135). Interestingly Harold, whose domestic regime is the source of so much of his mother's distress, is quick to pathologise any difficulty that Sylvia may have in settling in. Harold's great passion is the campaign to save a small piece of farmland running through the town – Goodchild's meadow – from being built on, and together with fellow campaigner Muriel Bartley he arranges for Sylvia to do some work on the project in the interests of keeping her busy so as to ward off what he calls 'net curtaintitis': 'an adaptation malady' (pp.165-166). And similarly, after Sally Bulmer, Carshall's Welfare Officer, has paid Sylvia a visit – and only succeeded in making her feel more alienated still – Harold reiterates this worry: 'I have such a fear of New Town neurosis' (p.189). Yet, in spite of his professed concern, Harold fails to understand his own part in his mother's misery.

Thus the home and her role within it – or indeed the lack thereof – is key to Sylvia's feeling of displacement in Carshall; but the spaces of the town itself also contribute to this experience. What is more, Wilson's descriptions of these spaces – the result of research trips to Harlow and Basildon – provide an insight into how the architecture of the New Towns contributed to them being, in Anthony Alexander's words, 'a combination of both the fast and urban, and the quiet and rural'.³⁰¹ Or, in Harold's formulation, '[v]illages that are big enough not to be afraid of the metropolis' (p.135). Sylvia's psychological distress, and in particular her confusion in the face of modernity, are mapped onto such spaces and her interactions with them.

Just as Sylvia is frequently unsure as to where to place herself within the modern domestic space, so is she unsure quite where to place the town's architecture, and her confusion begins with the house – 'The Sycamores' – itself. Taking her outside to admire the building shortly after her arrival, Harold enthusiastically extolls the virtues of the 'ranch-type house':

Harold pointed out the main features of the architecture. 'Ashlar blocks, you see, give it strength. And the white weather boarding preserves the local character. I'm all for picture windows, aren't you, Mother?' Sylvia didn't really know what to say about it – parts looked quite pretty and old-fashioned like a farmhouse, and other parts looked quite light and airy and modern (pp.65-66).

³⁰¹ Margaret Drabble, *Angus Wilson: A Biography* (London: Minerva, 1996), p.337; Alexander, *Britain's New Towns*, p.24.

It is not so much the modernity of the architecture that leaves Sylvia unsure of how to respond, but rather the collision of old and new – of traditional rural forms and novel urban ones. In other words she is alienated by the very quality that Alexander identifies as being central to the New Towns' peculiar identity. The collision, or juxtaposition, of the traditional and the novel is played out in the life of the house as well as in its architecture. For example, Harold says of seeing his parents' furniture transplanted into The Sycamores, 'It's like two worlds really', and Sylvia and Arthur tuck into liver and bacon while the rest of the family sit down to spaghetti Bolognese (pp.113 & 147).

Carshall Town Centre is also the site of comparable juxtapositions. Indeed, its very name gestures towards the way in which the New Towns often sought to balance tradition and novelty. Wilson capitalises 'Town Centre' throughout, and it is only occasionally preceded by 'the', creating a strange blend of universality and specificity. It refers not only to Carshall's town centre, to a particular location within the town, but also to the *idea* of a town centre. 'Town Centre' – a zoned, demarcated space, constructed to perform a set of pre-determined functions – evokes that which it most certainly is not: a site around which the rest of a settlement has developed over time and which has gradually accrued significance as a marketplace and a civic centre. During a shopping trip to Town Centre, Sylvia sees a mixture of tradition and novelty expressed in the fabric of the place.

[S]he watched the metal arms of the fountain jerkily dropping their loads of water; it was clever but you couldn't say that it played. Staring into the basin, she wondered what sort of supervisor they could have that would let it silt up with chocolate wrappers and ice-cream cartons like that. [...] Although it was difficult and modern, you could admire the way the metal had been twisted so cleanly. Then she studied the lilac and pink mural with its emerald background – she didn't like that so much, because the two girls had such long necks and sheepish faces, and why was the young man with a kind of big brimmed velour hat standing naked on the bank of flowers, with his head turned away from the girls? It didn't have the clean lines that you looked for in modern things, and yet it didn't make any sense either. Someone had chipped the lower mosaics too, which ought to have been attended to (p.136).

The fountain blends the modern and the pastoral, and, although Wilson's description recalls Bowen's *Brighterville* and fountains that 'not so much played as functioned',

Sylvia experiences not so much revulsion as a sense that the whole scene does not quite fit together, and that it is actually less than the sum of its parts.³⁰² It lacks the ‘clean lines’ of modernism, but is also without the narrative ‘sense’ that Sylvia associates with less ‘difficult’ art and design. The dirt and grime that has accumulated around the sculpture is also incongruous with the way in which the materials have been so precisely manipulated in producing the work; this is a strange muddling of high art and the mundane. Sylvia’s dismay at this scene is echoed just a few lines later, as she window-shops:

She was disappointed to see how they had packed goods into the windows; it was not the kind of clean, modern display you could expect nowadays, but more like the little drapers and that in Paignton back in the twenties when they’d lived there (p.137).

Rather than reacting against novelty, as she has in Harold’s home, Sylvia is actually disappointed by the kind of lapsed modernity she encounters in the town itself. The commercial and civic spectacle of Town Centre has not lived up to its promise, resembling instead a rehashing of familiar forms, and thus it occupies an indeterminate hinterland between her memories and her expectations. When Sylvia encounters unbridled modernity, as she does in the similarly capitalised ‘Public Library’, her response is overwhelmingly positive: ‘you really didn’t need assistance here, everything was so well set out and clean, and so light with all the big glass windows’ (p.137).

Much New Town architecture though, both in Carshall and in its real-life equivalents, does indeed occupy this space that was somewhere between the traditional and the novel; or, as *Architectural Design* put it, ‘a compromise between the orthodox and new thinking, with the obvious result that often the disadvantages of the former and none of the advantages of the latter obtain’.³⁰³ This approach to building, which was certainly not confined to the New Towns alone, has been given various labels by architectural critics and historians. Kenneth Frampton calls it “‘reduced” Neo-Georgian’ or the ‘Contemporary Style’, while simultaneously highlighting its indebtedness to ‘the official architecture of Sweden’s long-

³⁰² Wilson wrote the introduction to Bowen’s *Collected Stories*, and it is tempting to conclude that he had Bowen’s story in mind when writing this passage.

³⁰³ Editorial, ‘The Town Centre, Stevenage’, *Architectural Design*, vol. 29 (July, 1959), 259-261 (p.259).

established Welfare State', whereas Anthony Sutcliffe chooses 'Modern Free Style'.³⁰⁴ Whatever the label, they all refer to the same central fact, articulated unusually succinctly by the editors of *The Architectural Review* in 1958: 'Modern architecture, as now practised by the many, has largely become what we declared it never would be when it was the artistic creation of the few: a *style*'.³⁰⁵ The default architecture at the time of the New Towns' construction was a form of popularly acceptable modernism, consisting of modernist forms softened by more traditional, vernacular details. Harold's house is a case in point, as, in a quite different way, is the fountain in Town Centre. The New Town's church – St Saviour's, 'quite famous as a modern church' – offers yet another version of this architecture of compromise:

[D]espite the odd metal steeple more like a piece of children's Meccano and the funny slots in the side of the building, it was rather plain inside [...] Apart from a long thin silver crucifix that stood on the altar steps, you'd hardly know it for a church – not that it was at all like chapel; it was just a big room with everything very simple and quiet [...] She picked up a card and read the prayer that was printed on it – 'help us to avoid the easy jibe, the grouchy mood, and the martyred smile. Help us to forget ourselves in doing what we can for others and in doing it cheerfully...' (p.139).

The building's friendly, colloquial modernity is echoed in the chatty prayer card, but, for all its good cheer the building lacks a sense of purpose and identity, or so it seems to Sylvia. She again struggles to place herself in relation to the architecture and design, to locate the building within the framework of her own experience; it contains few of the hallmarks of church architecture as she understands it, but neither does it resemble the spaces of her Methodist upbringing. The church in Old Carshall, meanwhile, is an entirely different proposition: 'really ancient with a lovely old organ painted blue and gold, and real stained glass windows, one of them very interesting to her because of the tommies and hospital nurses shown in it' (p.145). Sylvia takes pleasure in the old church, partly because she finds it more aesthetically pleasing than its modern equivalent, but also, crucially, because she is able to place herself in some kind of relation to it. Sylvia met Arthur during the First World War,

³⁰⁴ Kenneth Frampton, *Modern Architecture: A Critical History* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1980), p.262; Sutcliffe, *London: An Architectural History*, p.178.

³⁰⁵ Editorial, foreword to the special 'Preview' issue, *The Architectural Review*, vol. 123 (January, 1958), 5-8 (p.6).

when he was a wounded officer and she was a nurse. The building gives her back something of her own, recently lost, identity, and she has a similarly nourishing experience at the Crown, 'a beautiful old Trust House' in Old Carshall. Sylvia stops there for tea: 'she ate her piece of shortbread with a real relaxed pleasure. For a moment she forgot everything, and fancied that she was having her weekly afternoon off' (p.145). The place allows her to imagine her way back into her old life, and her conversation with Mrs Thwaites, who runs the Crown, lets her temporarily reclaim her identity as a 'manageress', even though Mrs Thwaites's attitude towards Carshall suggests that there is something in the place itself which is at odds with Sylvia's former profession: 'we do most of the parties for the directors and senior executives in the New Town. There's nowhere of the right kind in that terrible place, of course' (p.146).

Sylvia's experience of the countryside around Carshall follows a similar pattern: her first interactions are jarring, even traumatic, but then ultimately healing, allowing her to come to terms with her troubled childhood and her place in Carshall. Her – and indeed the book's – first real engagement with the countryside beyond the town comes while Sylvia is undertaking some work for the campaign to save Goodchild's meadow. The meadow itself is a hybrid space, not quite urban and not quite rural, and Harold refers to it as 'that expression of the country running through the town' (p.158). It is this hybridity, according to Harold, that is its key contribution to Carshall's identity. But, as with the domestic space and the architectural spaces of the town, it is precisely this indeterminacy that Sylvia finds troubling. At first, studying documents related to the meadow serves to affirm Sylvia's identity as a farmer's daughter: 'if you'd been brought up in the country you couldn't take fields seen from the top of a bus seriously' (p.172). The meadow is like a parody of the countryside. But she finds 'the alternative of Carshall houses like Harold's and Muriel's eating further into that vast dark stretch of country that she looked out upon from her window each night' deeply disturbing, so much so that she reacts physically to the thought of it:

As she visualised the scene her pulse beat more quickly, and giddiness or shortness of breath intervened to save her from contemplating the struggle – the digging up of those gloomy fields, the bricks and mortar, the workmen with their transistors sprawling across the clayey land (p.172).

She beats a mental retreat to the haven of the New Town, ‘the penned-up safety of “The Sycamores”’ (p.172). This seems a paradoxical response given her revulsion at the thought of Carshall’s expansion; ‘penned-up safety’ hardly evokes homely comfort.

Sylvia is stranded between a debased modernity and an equally debased rurality, and the situation is only worsened by a trip to Gorman’s Wood: ‘the country in the town’, located ‘between Melling and the Industrial Area’ and ‘a copse preserved to enrich and soften the lives of those who lived on the estate’ (p.194). Here nature is only permitted so that it might mitigate the harshness of town life, and there is, moreover, a strangely urban feel to Gorman’s Wood:

The trees were mostly firs whose evergreen darkness seemed disappointingly shabby and dusty, when elsewhere, all around, deciduous trees were showing their subtle range of colours. The undergrowth was a mass of brambles, bruised and purple from winter’s ravages, just when anemones and primroses and celandines should have carpeted the ground. But even if there were some stray clumps of wild flowers in Gorman’s Wood, Sylvia could not find them, for the only footpath was cut off from the trees on each side by close-meshed wire fences. To offer this narrow, well-trod, ant-infested way as some substitute for the ranging, unbounded choice of the solitude of the countryside seemed to Sylvia such a cheat that had she been younger and more agile she would have climbed the fence in defiance of authority to tread down the undergrowth if only in protest (pp.194-195).

A particular kind of dirt and grime peculiar to town life has impinged upon the wood: buildings and streets become ‘shabby and dusty’, not trees. A street – the footpath – has been carved through the space, but it does not allow the walker to access the natural world it cuts through, rather it holds her at arm’s length. This organised, planned nature is another kind of hybrid, with the benefits of neither of the forms it poaches from. Yet it is a source of irritation for Sylvia rather than of trauma.

Sylvia does in fact go through a traumatic experience in this latter third of the novel, but it occurs not in the New Town, nor in the curtailed countryside of Gorman’s Wood, but in the authentic countryside. Here she gets caught in a powerful lightning storm, and, although terrified herself, manages to save a young

girl, Mandy Egan, when the tree under which the child is sheltering is struck by lightning (p.223). This experience actually heralds the beginning of a kind of recovery for Sylvia, and her ensuing friendship with the grateful Egan family allows her, in Conradi's phrase, to 'recuperate' her childhood from the traumatic experience described in the prologue, to 'recall a liberated version of [her] own childhood identity'.³⁰⁶ Once she has come to terms with her own youth she is no longer intimidated by the sheer difference of her grandchildren. For example, she accepts Ray's homosexuality in a way that Harold seems unable to. He feels that Ray's decision to move to London, far away from local gossip, is a rejection of Carshall (pp.297-298). Harold is ultimately inflexible, and unable to accommodate any deviation from what he considers to be the Carshall way of life, and this includes his son's sexuality: he insists that Ray must 'consider having some decent up-to-date treatment' (p.292). In contrast Sylvia does eventually overcome her 'adaptation malady', and even comes to take pride in Carshall's architecture, telling Shirley Egan, 'There are a lot of fine modern buildings in the New Town' (p.270). The novel ends on a hopeful note, with Sylvia's silent determination to move into 'a place of her own' near Town Centre (p.303).

Although Wilson's biographer Margaret Drabble also noted a tentative optimism in the novel³⁰⁷, Sandbrook and Clapson insist on somewhat more pessimistic readings. Sandbrook argues that, '[a]lthough at the end of the book she manages to reconcile herself to her new life, it is her first impression that lingers in the reader's memory', namely 'the hollowness of [Carshall's] classless pretensions'.³⁰⁸ Clapson, meanwhile, also suggests that it was Wilson's intention to paint a negative picture of the New Towns, but that he actually failed by 'inadvertently' showing Sylvia's neuroses to be the product of 'the depredations of her marriage and the personal legacy of her unhappy childhood', rather than of New Town Blues.³⁰⁹ Wilson certainly does show Sylvia's distress to be the product of a network of contributing factors, her past included, brought to a moment of crisis when she moves to a new life in Carshall, but the fact that it is the discredited Harold who is most blind to the complexity of his mother's experience – and who is quick to pathologise it in the language of New Town Blues – suggests that this is hardly

³⁰⁶ Conradi, *Angus Wilson*, p.35.

³⁰⁷ Drabble, *Angus Wilson*, p.340.

³⁰⁸ Sandbrook, *White Heat*, pp.176-177.

³⁰⁹ Clapson, *Invincible Green Suburbs, Brave New Towns*, pp.143-144.

inadvertent. If Wilson condemns anything then it is not Carshall itself, but Harold's inflexibility: his steadfast refusal to understand that anyone could find life in the town less than ideal, whether it be his son, because of his sexuality, or his mother, who feels displaced. If the novel does not go quite so far as to dispel as myth the existence of New Town Blues then it certainly works to reject the notion that an individual's relationship to place can be so easily categorised. It is Sylvia's individuality *in combination* with the spaces of the New Town that produces both her initial trauma and her eventual recovery.

'OH, FUCK ALL THIS LYING': B.S. Johnson and Decrepit London

Albert Angelo is the story of Albert, an aspiring architect who must earn his living as a supply teacher. At least, it is until less than twenty pages from the end of the book, where there is a dramatic break in the text, or, to use the words that Johnson himself applies in that moment, 'an almighty aposiopesis'.³¹⁰ The author not only interrupts the narrative, he refuses to continue with it: 'OH FUCK ALL THIS LYING!' (p.163). Moreover, he reveals that 'what im really trying to write about is writing not all this stuff about architecture trying to say something about writing about my writing im my hero [sic]' (p.167). Johnson then goes on to retrospectively place himself within the fiction that he has created and then subsequently disavowed on the grounds of its very fictiveness. The novel's prologue introduces us to Percy Circus in North London, where Albert lives, and Johnson describes how Albert has set up his drawing board 'overlooking the Circus', so that he might 'take benefit of the light' while working (p.14). At the opposite end of the book, post-aposiopesis, Johnson conjures an almost identical image, but replaces Albert with himself and drawing with writing, as well as relocating the scene from a window in Percy Circus to a window in Claremont Square, less than five minutes' walk away, and Johnson's own home (p.167). Having disrupted any illusory sense that the reader might have of Albert as an autonomous being with an existence outside of the pages of the book, Johnson unveils the mechanics through which he invented his character, revealing a process that involved making just small alterations to the facts of his own life to create Albert's.

³¹⁰ B.S. Johnson, *Albert Angelo* (London: Constable, 1964), p.167. Subsequent references to this edition are given in parentheses within the main body of the text.

I begin my discussion of Johnson's novel with these observations because they are key to how I will approach my reading of it, in so much as I want to keep in clear sight the author's insistence that he is writing about writing, and not about the experience of being an aspiring architect. Critics including Philip Tew and Andrzej Gasiorek have understood the conviction that writing – even the writing of fiction – should be primarily concerned with truth as central to Johnson's work.³¹¹ Johnson's decision to lay bare the mechanics of his story is undoubtedly part of that drive. Thus it might seem, in some sense, to be twisting the text out of shape were I to read Albert's musings upon the buildings around him and the buildings that he would like to build as a conscious contribution to the contemporaneous architectural discourse – and comparable in this sense to *The Caliph's Design* – as they are, on one level, simply a way for Johnson to write about writing. However, as Andy Wimbush has noted, this desire to 'tell the truth' through the writing of fiction manifests itself in the novel as painstaking attention to detail, particularly when it comes to the streets of London.³¹² Thus, although *Albert Angelo* is not really 'about' a man who wants to be an architect, it is most certainly a book about London in the early 1960s. And if *Late Call* and *High-Rise* describe different kinds of psychological distress, then this book is both the product and account of another kind of psychological distress: the struggle to write. Johnson states that the book is 'about frustration', and: 'The poetry comes from suffering. The poetry is the only thing to make me face the further suffering. For the poetry any suffering is endurable. Even years for a single line' (p.169). Clapson and Sandbrook take *Late Call* as a document of life in the New Towns – a way in which to access something of the psychological experience of these new spaces that was not otherwise recorded. *Albert Angelo* is a document of Johnson's struggle to write, but it is also a document of London. In the course of the novel Johnson takes careful account of certain portions of the city, paying close attention to the streets and buildings of certain areas. In paying such close attention, I will argue, Johnson echoes some of the architectural criticism of his and preceding decades, and in particular that criticism which is associated with *The Architectural Review* and *Townscape*; but, I will also suggest, Johnson's text revels in London's unreconstructed decrepitude in a way that contemporaneous critics did not. Finally, I

³¹¹ Philip Tew, *B.S. Johnson: A Critical Reading* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2001), pp.xi-xii; Gasiorek, *Post-War British Fiction*, pp.3-4.

³¹² Andy Wimbush, 'Albert Angelo', <<http://www.londonfictions.com/bs-johnson-albert-angelo.html>>, [accessed 05/02/15].

will consider how *Albert Angelo* documents the situation of some of London's most economically vulnerable individuals: working-class children (Johnson, like Albert, worked as a supply teacher). Johnson takes pleasure in London as he finds it; its dilapidation is a cause for celebration. He celebrates, too, the children who he documents, revelling particularly in their language and humour. But their condition is also a source of regret, even anger. These strands, inevitably, become tangled, and to suggest that the novel is straightforwardly intervening in questions of architecture, education or reconstruction more broadly would be to simplify a complex text. Rather, they are present in the novel because they are present in Johnson's London; they are *true*. Johnson's role as novelist is to frame these truths. As he states when listing his intentions in writing the book: 'there were some pretty parallels to be drawn between built-on-the-skew, tatty, half-complete, comically-called Percy Circus, and Albert, and London, and England, and the human condition' (p.176).

As I have already suggested in introducing this chapter's parameters, there was during this particular post-war moment a sense that reconstruction had failed. A sense of failure pervades Johnson's novel too. Running through the text is the failure of realism: the writing moves between the first, second and third person; parts of the text are laid out like a play script; in other places the text is arranged in two columns; a facsimile of a flyer is included; two of the pages, famously, have rectangular holes cut into them. This continual rupturing of form is tied up with the text's inevitable failure, as far as Johnson is concerned, to tell the truth, which he laments towards the book's close:

Faced with the enormity of life, all I can do is to present a paradigm of truth to reality as I see it: and there's the difficulty: for Albert defecates for instance only once during the whole book: what sort of a paradigm of the truth is that? (p.170)

Johnson finds that he is foiled in his endeavour by the sheer scale and scope of reality, if nothing else. This desire to tell the truth – manifested in the formal contortions that it produces – underpins all other aspects of the novel. It dictates that Albert's failure to build must eventually be revealed as Johnson's failure to write. It organises how the failures of the education system – specifically the manner in which it fails working-class children – are presented to the reader. And, of particular interest for my purposes here, it informs how the failure of London's reconstruction,

visible in its crumbling streets, is documented in text. It is this failure that I will address first of all.

In the previous chapter I looked to register something of the enthusiasm of and for planners and planning in the immediate post-war years. Although not shared by the writers under discussion, there was a genuine sense of energy and optimism around the discourse of reconstruction, resulting in a proliferation of different schemes for rebuilding Britain's cities, and London in particular. But in 1956 Ian McCallum, writing in *The Architectural Review*, observed that this optimism had thus far amounted to little or nothing: 'I suppose it was to be expected that central London would be rebuilt piecemeal. War-time dreams of a shining metropolis rising from the ruins were clearly over-optimistic, if not positively naïve. After all, the capital was not destroyed'.³¹³ McCallum cites the South Bank and the Barbican as the only two areas of the city that – in the case of the former – had, or – in the case of the latter – might still yet see the benefit of 'comprehensive reconstruction to a consistent and unified visual theme'.³¹⁴ In the following month one of McCallum's *Review* co-contributors, R. Furneaux Jordan, wrote:

Ten years ago the planner was a messiah leading post-war Britain into the promised land. Today he is the bogymen of Crichton Down. Neither view is valid since both are only sublimations of a mood, but at least the first was idealistic as well as necessary, while the second is as ignorant as it is anarchic. The first mood brought into being the Welfare State...in a sense, an ethical sense, Gladstone's Christian's State. The 1956 mood could ruin everything.³¹⁵

Planning, Furneaux Jordan was suggesting, had lost the popular support that was its lifeblood, and consequently the country was in grave danger of losing the gains that it had made post-1945. The public had once welcomed the planner's power to radically reorder the spaces and institutions of Britain, but now viewed that same power with suspicion. The Crichton Down affair was a scandal around which such suspicions were rallied when it emerged in 1954 that a plot of land which had been compulsorily purchased for use by the RAF shortly before the Second World War

³¹³ Ian McCallum, 'West End Offices', *The Architectural Review*, vol. 120 (October, 1956), 219-232 (p.219).

³¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p.219.

³¹⁵ R. Furneaux Jordan, 'L.C.C.: New Standards in Official Architecture', *The Architectural Review*, vol. 120 (November, 1956), 303-324 (p.304).

had subsequently been handed over to the Ministry of Agriculture once the war was over, instead of being returned to its aristocratic owners.³¹⁶ The planner's descent from 'messiah' to 'the bogymen of Criche Down' implies the public's resentment of state intervention in the nation's physical and social landscape, and seems a far cry from the passionate support for welfare of the 1940s. Such an attitude, Furneaux Jordan feared, might be highly destructive.

Eight years later Johnson's novel describes not so much destruction as dilapidation. This is our introduction to Albert's Islington:

The first thing you see about Percy Circus is that it stands most of the way up a hill, sideways, leaning upright against the slope like a practised seaman. And the next thing is that half of it is not there. [...] Some of the houses have patches where new London stocks show up yellow against the older blackened ones; then you know what happened to the rest of the Circus. New flats abut at an angle, awkwardly (pp.13-14).

The circus (Figure 9) is patched up, still bearing the scars of bomb damage that is twenty years old. Its new additions do not quite fit – literally. 'The paintwork is everywhere brown and old and peeling' (p.14). The other parts of London –



Figure 9, Percy Circus, photographed in 2015

Highbury,
Hammersmith,
the East End –
that the novel
traverses are
equally
rundown, but
this
tumbledown
city is a source
of great
delight,
because it is
truthful: 'I

³¹⁶ J. A. G. Griffith, 'The Criche Down Affair', *The Modern Law Review*, vol. 18 (November, 1955), 557-570.

enjoy it decadent and decaying, decrepit, like my state, London's state, England's state, man's state, the human condition' (pp.115-116). The condition of the city, which reflects back something of Albert's/Johnson's suffering, is found to be resonant with a particular kind of psychological distress, and thus finds its way into the detail of the text. London's decay is exhilarating:

Visually, architecturally, Cable Street, Cablestrasse, The Strasse, at night excites us: everywhere we go in this part of Stepney there are Georgian facades in all stages of repair, from the one beautifully-kept house in Wellclose Square to others with skeletal dormers from which the lead and boards have been stripped. There are bomb-derelict warehouses, too, one with a thick first-storey drawbridge suspended from chains above a gulf (p.51).

Not only its decay but the contrasts – the sheer range of different styles, different eras, different states of (dis)repair – are also a source of enjoyment. In *Late Call* the juxtaposition of old and new peculiar to the New Towns becomes a focus of Sylvia's anxiety and a way for Wilson to write it, but in *Albert Angelo* the juxtapositions endlessly thrown up by London's streets – gradually accrued and the product of accident not design – are pleasing. Combination is key to the text's aesthetic appreciation of the city. St. Paul's Church, Hammersmith, is best enjoyed in conjunction with the flyover, which 'sets off the church', '[g]raceful, curving away as though on tiptoe' (p.21). St. Paul's Cathedral has a similar relationship to the tower blocks that sit between it and the East End: 'The blocks set off the cathedral: none are as tall: their rectangularity against the dome's sweet curve' (p.40). Such juxtapositions are the product of unplanned reconstruction – a failure, as some commentators would have it. (It is interesting that it should be a flyover and some tower blocks, two pieces of post-war architecture that were and continue to be particularly vilified, that 'set off' London's more long-standing architecture.) But these descriptions, and others elsewhere in the novel, also chime with another aspect of the contemporaneous architectural discourse, one that was considerably more celebratory of juxtaposition in the urban scene: Townscape.

Townscape was not quite a movement, but it was also much more than simply a campaign. The key figures involved – J.M. Richards, Nikolaus Pevsner, Hubert de Cronin Hastings and Gordon Cullen – were all on the editorial board at *The Architectural Review*, and Townscape existed mainly in the journal's pages –

although it did spawn other publications, most notably Cullen's *Townscape* (1961). Many of the texts that make up Townscape were actually published long before Cullen's book. Hastings, for example, wrote 'Exterior Furnishing or Sharawaggi: The Art of Making Urban Landscape', published in the *Review* in 1944. This is an, if not *the*, originary Townscape text, and it lays out the central tenets of Townscape, but without actually using the label itself.³¹⁷ He would eventually apply the word 'Townscape' to these ideas in an article of the same name published in 1949 and written under his pen name, Ivor de Wolfe.³¹⁸

The texts that together constituted Townscape sought to bring the theory of the Picturesque out of the eighteenth century and to bear on post-war reconstruction.

[T]he great article of the Picturesque faith [...]: to plan irregularly, to disdain formality, to contrive beauties that shall be great, and strike the eye, but without any order or disposition of parts as shall be commonly or easily observed, to improve a scene according to the manner suggested by itself and without regard to systematical arrangement.³¹⁹

Its advocates were not anti-planning, but proposed instead a less rigid approach to planning that would make a virtue of contrast, whether it be in scale, style or age: 'Landscaping, variety of contemporary and old, both dignified and jolly, tradition and innovations, social sense and regard for lovable tit-bits – all will have their chance within the inconsistency of urban Sharawaggi'.³²⁰ ('Sharawaggi, Hastings informs the reader, is 'a Chinese term for irregular gardening'.)³²¹ Townscape, then, is not in favour of juxtaposition – rather, juxtaposition is its very essence. As Cullen wrote in the course of his 1953 critique of the New Towns: 'If I were asked to define Townscape I would say that one building is architecture but two buildings is Townscape. For as soon as two buildings are juxtaposed the art of Townscape is released'.³²²

³¹⁷ 'Exterior Furnishing or Sharawaggi: The Art of Making Urban Landscape', *The Architectural Review*, vol. 95 (January, 1944) 3-8. The article was left unaccredited, but was, according to John Macarthur and Mathew Aitchison, written by Hastings. John Macarthur and Mathew Aitchison, 'Pevsner's Townscape', in Nikolaus Pevsner, *Visual Planning and the Picturesque*, ed. by Mathew Aitchison (Los Angeles: Getty Publications, 2010), pp.1-43 (p.14).

³¹⁸ I. de Wolfe, 'Townscape', *The Architectural Review*, vol. 106 (December, 1949), 354-362.

³¹⁹ 'Exterior Furnishing or Sharawaggi', p.7.

³²⁰ *Ibid.*, pp.6-7.

³²¹ *Ibid.*, p.5.

³²² Cullen, 'Prairie Planning in the New Towns', p.33.

Townscape shifted the focus from the bird's-eye-view of the totalising plan down to street level, and to the eye of the walker. Cullen's drawings, which would very often feature in Townscape articles, were a way to visualise this perspective, showing the changing scene from the point-of-view of a pedestrian walking down an actual or idealised street and highlighting the juxtapositions as they would strike the eye. Of the body of work that makes up Townscape it is these drawings in particular that are called to mind by *Albert Angelo*'s enthusiasm for contrast, and in particular by those passages in which Johnson describes Albert's walks through the city. These walks are expressed as lists – as a kind of montage in text, with elements of the street appearing on the page as they would appear before Albert's eyes:

You decide to walk home slowly, up the City Road, towards the Angel. City Arms, St. Mark's Hospital for Fistula &c.; Mona Lisa Cafe Restaurant; vast anonymous factory block shouldering Georgian first-ratings mainly used for light industries; Albion House with two lovely bow-fronts spoilt by nursery stickers inside the windows and two comically sentimental plaster dogs guarding the steps.

Sale Closing Down. Aspenville wallpaper. Claremont Mission. Overgrown gardens this side. Claremont Square. The bank again, yellow, saffron, green. Across Amwell Street, down Great Percy Street, to the Circus (pp.40-41).

Both Johnson and the advocates of Townscape celebrate London's rich mix of buildings, and although Cullen and his colleagues were less enthusiastic about urban dilapidation – they insisted upon the value of a certain kind of visual disorder, but were equally adamant that variation did not mean decay – author and critics were responding to the given fact of London's architectural heterogeneity in comparable ways.

It would be overstating any similarity between the two to try and suggest that Johnson was making a specific reference to Townscape in describing these walks. However, an article he wrote in 1965 implies that he was most certainly *au fait* with Townscape's underlying principles, even if he does not go quite so far as to namecheck Townscape itself. 'London: the Moron-Made City, or Just a Load of Old Buildings with Cars in Between' is Johnson's celebration of the work of Alison and Peter Smithson, and in particular of their group of buildings for the *Economist* in St James's, London. He expresses especial admiration for the manner in which the

architects ‘took into account, blended with, and even flattered the eighteenth-century Boodle’s club on an adjacent site’, and offers the finished building as ‘a magnificent example of what can be done in urban renewal, a practical, successful demonstration of how to preserve the better buildings by re-stating them in terms of relationships with new buildings’.³²³ There is more than a hint of Townscape’s enthusiasm for juxtaposition here, and just a few months prior to the publication of Johnson’s article Gordon Cullen reviewed the building with similar enthusiasm, praising the scheme’s ‘flexibility in the solution of neighbourly problems’ and the fact that ‘the relationship of all the members exist in calm communication’.³²⁴

What Johnson’s article also shows is that not only was he familiar with architectural criticism, but he was also more than capable of producing it himself. *Albert Angelo* is undoubtedly infused with the language of architectural criticism; more than that, it contains passages that would slot seamlessly into *The Architectural Review*. The proficiency of Johnson’s analysis in both ‘London: the Moron-Made City, or Just a Load of Old Buildings with Cars in Between’ and the novel indicates that in these passages Johnson is not simply aping the style of architectural criticism, but actually working architectural criticism into the body of his novel. Returning to the first description of Percy Circus, Johnson follows his initial evocation of the place’s dilapidation with:

Percy Circus can be dated early Victorian by the windows, which have stucco surrounds as wide as the reveals are deep, with a scroll-bracket on either side at the top. The proportions are quite good, though the move away from Georgian is obvious except in the top and leadflushed dormers. There is stucco channelled jointing up to the bottom of the first-floor windows, which have little cast-iron balconies swelling enceintely. Each house is subtly different in its detail from each of its neighbours (p.14).

When Johnson shifts from his more generalised description of the space to this mode the effect is jarring. These sentences are not merely the product of close observation,

³²³ B.S. Johnson, ‘London: the Moron-Made City, or Just a Load of Old Buildings with Cars in Between’, in *Well Done God! Selected Prose and Drama of B.S. Johnson*, ed. by Jonathan Coe, Philip Tew and Julia Jordan (London: Picador, 2013), pp.398-406 (pp.400-401). Originally published in *London Life*, 23-29 October 1965.

Johnson also produced a documentary on the Smithson’s Robin Hood Estate for the BBC in 1970. See: Sukhdev Sandhu, ‘B.S. Johnson, Brutalist’, <<http://www.3ammagazine.com/3am/bs-johnson-brutalist/>> [accessed 09/02/15].

³²⁴ Gordon Cullen, ‘The *Economist* Buildings, St James’s’, *The Architectural Review*, vol. 137 (February, 1965), 115-124 (pp.116 & 120).

but a well-informed analysis conveyed through self-consciously technical vocabulary. Moreover, Johnson's critique of the circus, and his writing on London more generally throughout *Albert Angelo*, echoes the contemporaneous concerns of the architectural press – and in particular of *The Architectural Review* – as well as its language. These concerns are expressed both through Albert's taste in buildings and in his aspirations as an architect. There is, for example, consistently throughout the text an appreciation of Georgian architecture, and even an elevation of it above all other styles. Albert rhapsodises: 'It has such rightness, even when it is not trying to be right, or there are things like economics against its being right, such grace, taste, good manners. All clichés about Georgian. But right, so right' (p.107). Moreover, he suspects he will never escape its shadow: 'I wonder if I can ever design anything uninfluenced by it' (p.107). Much the same could be said for many architects building in Britain for large swathes of the twentieth century; Neo-Georgian was more or less the default style for the first half of the century, and it continued to be an important influence for decades after the Second World War, not least on projects such as the New Towns. Albert's architectural prejudices are appropriate too, as he scorns the '[s]treet upon street of semi-detached mock-timbered gables' of Worcester Park, with its 'Norman arches on the porches, Gothic windows in the halls, Bakelite door furniture throughout, intensely unimaginative front garden layouts, identical wroughtiron [sic] gates, twee lanterns to light the porches' (p.136). Johnson presents an archetype of the suburban street, neighbourhoods often vilified by the architectural and popular presses alike. Finally, like his real-life contemporaries, Albert is continually grappling with the question of what it is to be 'modern'. He is interested in modern materials, and in their sensitive treatment; while watching a match at Stamford Bridge with his father he notes the shuttering marks on the stadium's concrete structure: 'not that such marks are not of the nature of the material, of the nature of concrete, for they are, but they can be well left or ill left. Here they are ill left' (p.25). He insists that 'form should be honest, should be honestly exposed' (p.81). And he feels a pressing need to be a modern architect responding to a modern world:

Of course, I would really like to be designing a Gothic cathedral, all crockets and finials and flying buttresses, but I must be of my time, ahead of my time, rather, using the materials of my time, the

unacknowledged legislators, and so on, in accord with, of, my age, my time, my generation, my life (p.107).

If anything, these preoccupations actually had more currency during inter-war years, when the architectural press and profession were much exercised by the question of what it meant to be ‘modern’, or, indeed, even ‘modernist’. By the point at which Johnson was writing, ideas around the honest use of materials and expression of structure in form had become something akin to doctrine, rather than points to be raised and discussed; such widespread acceptance of these ideas within the profession was a function of modernism’s evolution from avant-garde movement to style, which Richards describes. But if these concerns make Albert seem like somewhat of an anachronism then one of his projects – ‘an arts centre for a town of half a million’ – identifies him as an architect more authentically of his moment (p.108).

There is, then, a certain documentary quality to the writing of the London spaces in which Johnson’s story is so tangibly set, and it is documentary in two senses: it gives detailed accounts of parts of the city as a walker might experience them, and it captures something of the ways in which those same spaces – or spaces like them – were being discussed and represented contemporaneously, specifically by architects and architectural commentators. There is also something of the same quality in the various ways in which Johnson presents the children that Albert encounters as a supply teacher. It is not simply that, given Johnson’s own work as a supply teacher and his revelation of the proximity of Albert’s ‘life’ to his own, we make the (retrospective) assumption that these passages are derived from the author’s own experience, and that they thus have a claim to a particular veracity on these grounds. There is also something sociological about the text’s detailing of the children’s behaviour and situation, and Johnson makes space for such details in the text through his inventive use of form. For example, during a passage in which Albert is taking the class register Johnson splits the text into two columns, with one side consisting of words spoken out loud – little more than Albert reading out the names out and the children answering – and the other articulating Albert’s thoughts, namely his opinions regarding how to go about managing a classroom of unfamiliar children, as well as his observations concerning the children themselves. He considers the virtues and uses of humour in the classroom – ‘You will risk a joke.

[...] Good, they laughed a little' (pp.35-36) – and records something of the social make-up of the school: when a boy called Eray Mustapha confirms that he can indeed speak English, Albert notes, 'Accent like any other North Londoner's, must have been born here' (p.36). Johnson records too, with apparent pleasure, the rhythms and cadences of the children's language, both written and spoken. A number of reflective writing pieces by the children are included in their totality, with titles such as 'What I think of flabby Chops Albert', 'English Composition on What I think of Albert' and 'Our Techerer Mr ALBERT' (pp.154-163). Albert is often amused by their spoken language, not because of its immaturity but because of its inventiveness; when a child, referring to Albert's new shoes, says, 'Cor, dig them broffel-creepers', Albert's inner monologue exclaims, 'Marvellous phrase. Try not to laugh' (p.69). The sheer quantity of such language having made its way into the text is testament to Johnson's affection for it, and, even though for Albert supply teaching is the practical reality of his failure to practise as an architect, the text's treatment of his pupils and their situation is overwhelmingly empathetic and affectionate.

A number of the texts considered in the course of my previous chapter – namely *The World My Wilderness*, 'The Destructors' and *An Episode of Sparrows* – placed children amongst the ruins as a way of thinking about the possibilities and potential limits of reconstruction. *Late Call* and *Albert Angelo* use children, or more broadly youth itself, to think about the *products* of reconstruction, or in the case of Johnson's novel the lack thereof. Sylvia begins to form meaningful relationships with the younger generations at the same time as finding ways to locate herself in her new life and the New Town. I have, in my reading of *Albert Angelo*, resisted approaching the text through the interior life of Albert, and so do not want to make a comparable statement about Albert's psychology and his attitude towards the children that he teaches. What I do want to note is a certain pessimism in the text regarding the situation of London's working-class children, a pessimism that Johnson himself acknowledges and highlights in his post-aposiopesis account of his intentions in writing the book:

Didactic, too, social comment on teaching, to draw attention, too, to improve: but with less hope, for if the government wanted better education it could be provided easily enough, so I must conclude,

again, that they specifically want the majority of children to be only partially-educated (p.176).

Much earlier in the text, a similar observation is made by Albert:

They sit, large and awkward at the aluminium-framed tables and chairs, men and women, physically, whom you are for today trying to help to teach to take places in a society you do not believe in, in which their values already prevail rather than yours. Most will be wives and husbands, some will be whores and ponces: it's all the same; any who think will be unhappy, all who don't think will die (p.47).

If the city's dilapidated architecture is evocative of reconstruction's failure, then the children's fate illustrates the failure of the post-war reconstruction project more broadly. The novel does hint at the partial progress of reconstruction – the new, awkwardly oriented flats on Percy Circus, the school dinners scheme of which Albert, a London schoolchild before the war, did not have the benefit (pp.13 & 31) – but these are the exception. By and large, Johnson's London has been barely touched by reconstruction, either architecturally or socially, and the novel offers little hope that it will be.

'New Jerusalem': J.G. Ballard and the Failure of High-Rise Living

Angus Wilson's *Late Call* examines one peculiarly post-war approach to building and inhabiting space – the New Towns – and J.G. Ballard's *High-Rise* examines another: high-rise housing blocks. The histories of the New Towns and high-rise living in Britain are linked in a number of ways. Firstly, the two are by no means mutually exclusive; while high-rise blocks tend to be associated with the inner city, they were also an important part of the vocabulary of New Town architecture. Secondly, the two were contiguous solutions to the same problem, namely that the nation's urban centres, and in particular London, had a high population density, so space was at a premium, and you could either move people out or move them up. Thirdly, both were the subject of fierce debate regarding their perceived successes or failures – and with high-rises, as with the New Towns, this debate was always politically charged, with these buildings being made to denote either the success or failure of various governments' building programmes. Fourthly, and crucially for the

purposes of this chapter, this ‘failure’, when it was proclaimed, was frequently couched in terms of the supposedly damaging impact of the architecture upon its inhabitants.

I want to turn briefly to some instances in which high-rises were and continue to be praised as successes, because to do so will help to illuminate something of the particular character of the narrative of failure that became attached to these buildings almost as soon as they were completed. Unlike the New Towns, high-rises *per se* were not decried for their aesthetic shortcomings by the architectural press, although in popular culture more broadly they certainly were. In fact, although individual examples did of course attract the ire of architectural critics, a number actually became greatly celebrated buildings. The LCC’s two high-rise estates at Roehampton – particularly early examples of residential high-rise building in London, begun in 1952 and completed in 1959 – have been consistently praised for their architectural merits both at the time of building and since.³²⁵ Denys Lasdun’s ‘cluster block’, Keeling House in Bethnal Green, and Ernő Goldfinger’s Trellick Tower (Figure 10) in Notting Hill are also highly regarded as important works of British modernism, even as they have been indicted for being amongst the worst examples of this ‘failed’ architecture. Trellick was particularly vilified, going by the nickname the ‘Tower of Terror’ during the late 1970s and early 1980s, and ‘experiencing near-total social breakdown’.³²⁶ Both are now highly desirable, and highly-priced, addresses, although Trellick Tower does still house a number of council tenants; Keeling House, meanwhile, is a gated community.³²⁷ Residential high-rise buildings attracted praise for other reasons too, summed up in what William JR Curtis has called ‘a vulgate of “virtues”’: ‘cleanliness, density, greenery, order, replacement of slums’.³²⁸ It has become something of a truism that by or during the 1970s high-rise housing’s failure was universally accepted fact, with

³²⁵ An editorial in *Architectural Design*, published while the blocks were still very much under construction, declared: ‘When the housing department of the L.C.C. was formed it was hoped that work of this calibre and complexity would result. The Roehampton scheme is a vindication of that hope and proves that it is possible for the work of an official architects’ department to remain fresh and to make a contribution to the development of modern architecture’. ‘Flats at Roehampton Lane’, *Architectural Design*, vol. 25 (February, 1955), 50-51 (p.51). Just over fifty years later Anthony Sutcliffe notes that they ‘were much admired at the time’ and ‘looked very good indeed – for a time’ (London, p.181). This is, in the context of Sutcliffe’s book, fulsome praise.

³²⁶ Lynsey Hanley, *Estates: An Intimate History* (London: Granta, 2007), p.113.

³²⁷ Owen Hatherley’s work is particularly important in charting the relationship between the narrative of post-war social housing’s ‘failure’ and present-day gentrification. See: *Militant Modernism* (Ropley: Zero Books, 2008).

³²⁸ William J.R. Curtis, *Modern Architecture Since 1900*, 2nd edn. (Oxford: Phaidon, 1987), p.294.

commentators since identifying this consensus as one facet of the broader failure or ‘death’ of either post-war reconstruction or British architectural modernism: Sandbrook states that ‘by the mid-1970s developers and planners were almost universally loathed’, and that ‘[b]y the early 1970s, the tower block had become a powerful metaphor for the shattered ideals of the post-war consensus’; Sutcliffe dates ‘the reaction against modern architecture’ to ‘the late 1970s’; Owen Hatherley, meanwhile, notes, with more than a pinch of irony, that the ‘death’ of modernism has often ‘been dated to the collapse of the shoddy, prole-stacking Ronan Point tower block in East London’ in 1968.³²⁹ But others note that, even at this supposed moment of crisis for both modernism and reconstruction, many people were enthusiastic about moving into new high-rise housing.³³⁰

As is the case with the New Towns, it is always equally possible to find evidence that high-rise estates were deeply unpopular with the people who lived in them. Sandbrook, for example, points to a study carried out during the 1960s in



Figure 10, Trellick Tower

which ‘[a]s many as four out of ten [of the residents interviewed] told researchers they felt lonely and cut off’.³³¹ A lack of community, particularly the difficulty of forming bonds with new neighbours in the absence of a street that allowed for chance encounters or a garden fence to chat over, was often cited as one of the worst things about living in a high-rise. Lasdun’s aforementioned Keeling House provides an interesting case study of the supposed failure to generate a sense of community amongst high-rise residents, as it was designed

³²⁹ Sandbrook, *State of Emergency*, pp.187 & 190; Sutcliffe, *London*, p.184; Hatherley, *Militant Modernism*, p.12.

³³⁰ Ben Campkin, *Remaking London: Decline and Regeneration in Urban Culture* (London and New York: I.B. Tauris, 2013), p.84. Campkin’s case study here is the Aylesbury Estate and its sister estate the Heygate in Elephant and Castle. Both sites have been sold to developers. The Heygate has already been demolished and replaced, while the Aylesbury is awaiting demolition. The lively campaigns conducted by residents in an attempt to save their homes are a testament to the community’s deep affection for the estates.

³³¹ Sandbrook, *State of Emergency*, p.190.

with the express intention of '[recreating] working-class communities in high-rise redevelopment', complete 'with front doors and kitchen balconies allowing conversations between neighbours'.³³² Furthermore, as Curtis notes, great attention was paid to local detail: 'The actual dwellings were made two storeys high and were thus based on the typical local house-type, while the sills and proportions restated the scale and rhythms of the neighbouring nineteenth-century facades'. This was, then, an attempt at 'turning the traditional Bethnal Green street on its end'.³³³ Sixteen years after Keeling House was built, however, Nicholas Taylor gave an account of this endeavour's failure:

The cluster block was supposed to encourage neighbourliness by the way in which it grouped together round a common lift shaft what were in effect four separate tower blocks, with only two flats per floor. Theoretically, therefore, there were eight families to each floor rather than four or five; but such was the curious funnelling and spiralling effect on gusts of wind caused by Lasdun's layout, with the access galleries and bridges to the lift shaft left absolutely open to the elements, that the social effect in practice [...] was that families on the same floor but in different blocks of the cluster rarely got to know each other at all. Each pair of flats became an isolated cul-de-sac; and thus, far from cementing together communal living, Mr Lasdun had actually achieved a dwelling with greater privacy and isolation than any previously known in London.³³⁴

It is, crucially, the way in which Lasdun's design organises space that Taylor identifies as its failing – the fault lying with the novel 'cluster' structure.³³⁵

Both Lasdun's intention to design a sense of community into the building's fabric and Taylor's assessment of his failure to do so rest upon an important conviction: that buildings, and some buildings more than others, have a profound impact upon the people that inhabit them, and that they can not only induce psychological distress – as in the mass diagnosis of New Town Blues – but that they impact upon residents' collective behaviour, defining the ways in which they interact with one another. Patrick Dunleavy identifies this conviction as a defining

³³² Sutcliffe, *London*, p.182.

³³³ Curtis, *Modern Architecture Since 1900*, p.290.

³³⁴ Taylor, *The Village in the City*, pp.87-88.

³³⁵ Hatherley writes of Keeling House's more recent history: 'Before the block was sold to developers, residents tried to save the building from a demolition threatened by Hackney Council, praising, funnily enough, the "community" created by the form of the cluster block itself' (*Militant Modernism*, p.10).

characteristic of the ‘ideology’ of the high-rise, and states that this led to the practice of ‘incorporating in high-flat designs features which it was supposed would produce desired forms of social behaviour’.³³⁶ The example of Lasdun’s ‘cluster block’ is also illustrative of another important element in the narrative of the failure of the high-rise: there is in evidence here a gap between what architects thought they were giving people and what those people felt they were getting. Architectural critic Ian Nairn summed up this state of affairs – which he claimed was true of the profession as a whole, not just those engaged in building high-rise estates – in a 1966 article entitled ‘Stop the Architects Now’, stating that buildings were being designed and built according to a set of ‘untested preconceptions’ and without due attention being paid to ‘what people are actually like, in all their frailty and diversity’. As a consequence, he argues, ‘not surprisingly, the architects and the planners are treated by the public, in general, with contempt. They see the architect as a wet kind of nuisance, eternally fingering his bow-tie on the edge of real life’.³³⁷ Other commentators have suggested that the disparity between architects’ intentions and the inhabitants’ lived reality was somewhat starker – that architects were simply not interested in what it was that the people who they were ostensibly building for wanted. The following anecdote from Nicholas Taylor, for instance, suggests as much:

In 1967, as an assistant editor of the *Architectural Review*, I was asked by my editor, the redoubtable J.M. Richards, to put together a special issue of the magazine which would illustrate ‘the best of current housing design’, together with a text explaining ‘what we think should be done’. He made quite clear that what was wanted by him and by the other editors was a typical *AR* tract on the great god Urbanity, and his cosmetic soul-sister Townscape. My idea of importing into the argument some sociological evidence indicative of what ordinary people actually wanted was scornfully dismissed by the proprietor, de Cronin Hastings, alias Ivor de Wolfe, with the words ‘But *we know* what should be done.’³³⁸

³³⁶ Patrick Dunleavy, *The Politics of Mass Housing in Britain, 1945-1975: A Study of Corporate Power and Professional Influence in the Welfare State* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1981), p.57. Dunleavy also notes: ‘The leading instance of this was the adoption of Le Corbusier’s “streets in the air” idea at Sheffield to improve contact between neighbours (an effort in which they failed dismally)’.

³³⁷ Ian Nairn, ‘Stop the Architects Now’, *The Observer*, 13 February 1966, p.21.

³³⁸ Taylor, *The Village in the City*, p.79.

As I have already noted, Taylor was incensed by the thought of architects spending all day designing high-rise blocks before returning home to their own ‘cosy creeper-hung suburban cottages’: ‘The fundamental fault of tenements and flats is, to repeat, the hypocrisy of double standards that they express: those who design them would never be seen dead living in them’.³³⁹ Some more recent accounts have echoed Taylor’s sentiments, seeing architects’ supposed ignorance of people’s needs and desires as wilful: in a particularly evocative turn of phrase Lynsey Hanley describes the ‘clean concrete lines of Modernist architecture’ that were, ‘like an intellectual flu, disseminated from on high by those who thought a strong dose of it would do the weakest the most good’.³⁴⁰ Ballard himself, too, in a 2006 article and with a dry sarcasm recognisable from his novels, evokes the ‘enlightened planners who would never have to live in or near them [modernist buildings], and who were careful never to stray too far from their Georgian squares in the heart of heritage London’.³⁴¹ This tendency to divorce high-rise residential buildings from the experience of their inhabitants that was demonstrated by the architectural profession and those closely associated with it in the heyday of British modernism (praising them as aesthetically pleasing objects) and then by private developers towards the end of the twentieth century and on into the twenty-first (condemning them as eyesores, blights on the landscape) is further illustrative of the gulf between how people who build buildings perceive these estates and how the people who call them home perceive them.

When the first residents arrived in the New Towns their feelings of displacement, of being without the community that had previously provided them with a support network, were routinely pathologised as New Town Blues. High-rise blocks, for their part, also quickly became associated with ill-health, and not simply something akin to the psychological distress described in *Late Call*. A survey conducted on behalf of the Department of the Environment in 1973

found that high-rise residents suffered from more health problems because they were less likely to go for walks or exercise, while other studies found that the elderly and children were more likely to get respiratory infections from being trapped inside all day.

³³⁹ *Ibid.*, p.64.

³⁴⁰ Hanley, *Estates*, p.104.

³⁴¹ J.G. Ballard, ‘A Handful of Dust’,
<<http://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2006/mar/20/architecture.communities>> [accessed 09/02/15].

Researchers also regularly recorded high instances of vandalism, drug use and violence.³⁴² This criminality too was understood as a kind of epidemic – a collective sickness that affected high-rise residents, engendered by the building itself – and the link between criminality and high-rise housing estates had already been solidified into the theory of ‘defensible space’ by Canadian architect Oscar Newman a year prior to the publication of the Department of the Environment’s survey. (Although the theory initially came about as the result of studies of urban communities and environments in the U.S.A., Newman himself would soon import ‘defensible space’ from across the Atlantic, touring the Aylesbury Estate in Elephant and Castle and applying his theories to it in front of the camera for the BBC’s *Horizon* programme in 1974, while British geographer Alice Coleman would draw upon the theory and apply it to the UK context in *Utopia on Trial: Vision and Reality in Planned Housing*, published in 1985.)

Newman intended his theory to have a practical application in the bid to reduce crime rates in housing estates, defining ‘defensible space’ as ‘a model for residential environments which inhibits crime by creating the physical expression of a social fabric that defends itself’.³⁴³ In other words, a model for creating the impression of a vigilant community on the lookout for ‘the criminal’. It is, Newman posits, the lack of defensible space in housing estates that is the cause of their high crime rates. Estates, he argues, contain a great deal of ostensibly public, shared space – but in effect none of the residents feel any sense of ownership over these spaces: ‘the resident living within large, apartment tower developments feels his responsibilities begin and end within the boundaries of his own apartment’.³⁴⁴ Consequently such spaces are not subject to collective surveillance by the community. Newman suggests this phenomenon is more pronounced in high-rise estates, and even goes so far as to posit a direct statistically verifiable correlation between a building’s height and its residents’ propensity to commit criminal acts.³⁴⁵ Coleman neatly summarises Newman’s thinking on the subject in her own book:

³⁴² Sandbrook, *State of Emergency*, p.189.

³⁴³ Oscar Newman, *Defensible Space: People and Design in the Violent City* (London: Architectural Press, 1972), p.3.

³⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, p.4.

³⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, p.28.

The more people are spaced out on different levels, the less they interact and the more anonymous the building becomes. This means not only that more crime takes place on the higher floors, but also that the building as a whole becomes more vulnerable to criminal violation.³⁴⁶

Moreover, such spaces, for Newman, do not merely contribute to the increased incidence of criminal behaviour – they engender it:

In our newly-created dense and anonymous residential environments, we may be raising generations of young people who are totally lacking in any experience of personal or communal space and by extension, of the personal rights and property of others. In many ways, therefore, defensible space design also attempts to attack the root causes of crime.³⁴⁷

It is the organisation of space that produces an individual's propensity for criminality, or indeed aversion to it, and Newman encapsulated his position rather more simplistically for *Horizon*: 'modern architecture actually encourages people to commit crime'.³⁴⁸

Newman and Coleman's thesis is patently problematic, chiefly due to its refusal to take proper account of the role played by socio-economic factors in the causes of crime.³⁴⁹ They attribute a brand of space-specific criminality to the working-class, but fail to see how that criminality is itself a function of class relations. Thus the theory of defensible space contributes to the narrative of the 'failure' of high-rise housing, a narrative that, through vilifying the architecture, vilified its occupants.

Ballard's story of an affluent community turning violently upon itself and the building it inhabits both does and does not participate in this narrative; or rather, Ballard acknowledges it as a given fact before moving past it. As with *Albert Angelo*, *High-Rise* does not fully implicate itself in contemporaneous conversations in the way that *Late Call* does. Similarly, there is a great deal that is recognisable in Ballard's text, although rather than the strong sense of place that is established in

³⁴⁶ Alice Coleman, *Utopia on Trial: Vision and Reality in Planned Housing*, 2nd edn. (London: Hilary Shipman, 1990), p.14.

³⁴⁷ Newman, *Defensible Space*, p.4.

³⁴⁸ Campkin, *Remaking London*, p.88.

³⁴⁹ Campkin provides an insightful critique of both studies, as well as of the *Horizon* film (*Remaking London*, pp.86-95).

Johnson's novel here it is the rehearsal of ideas and images associated with high-rises that strikes us as familiar. But Ballard also works hard to distance both the building he describes and the characters he peoples it with from real-life conditions. Consequently, although the novel is clearly informed by narratives around high-rise living that had currency at the time of writing, it also feels self-consciously cut off from them. Rather than truly intervening in the conversation, the novel is an examination of a psychological experience quite specific to the world of *High-Rise*: the result of characters and setting at once recognisable but also defamiliarised.

Ballard's acknowledgement of the high-rise housing 'failure' narrative is only made explicit on a handful of occasions, and in the most notable instance it is made through the character of Richard Wilder, a young television journalist. Wilder is planning to make a documentary examining 'life in the high-rise in terms of its design errors and minor irritations' and 'the psychology of living in a community of two thousand people boxed up into the sky'.³⁵⁰ It is in the midst of this articulation of Wilder's vision – delivered in the third person but from the journalist's point-of-view – that Ballard refers to the wider controversies regarding high-rise living, but in an uncharacteristically journalistic tone:

All the evidence accumulated over several decades cast a critical light on the high-rise as a viable social structure, but cost-effectiveness in the area of public housing and high profitability in the private sector kept pushing these vertical townships into the sky against the real needs of their occupants (p.52).

Residential high-rise blocks are, Ballard concludes, a failure, and he condemns them as such within the parameters set by the existing 'failure' narrative; they have a demonstrably negative impact upon the well-being of their occupants – '[t]he psychology of high-rise living had been exposed with damning results' – which is linked to the fact that they were built without any attention being paid to what it is that people actually want from their housing, and that this grave oversight plays out in the resultant spaces: 'Wilder was convinced that the high-rise apartment was an insufficiently flexible shell to provide the kind of home which encouraged activities, as distinct from somewhere to eat and sleep' (p.52).

³⁵⁰ J.G. Ballard, *High-Rise* (London: Flamingo, 2000), p.52. Subsequent references to this edition are given in parentheses within the main body of the text.

What is particularly striking about this passage is Ballard's conflation of the experience of social housing tenants with that of those living in privately rented or owned high-rise apartments. The implication here is that 'the incidence of crime, divorce and sexual misdemeanours' and 'the frequency of insomnia and other psychosomatic disorders' occur in the same way in both private and public high-rise housing, and that they occur for the same reason: because the building generates ill health and anti-social behaviour. The implication is made explicit elsewhere, this time in a section that takes the building's architect, Anthony Royal, as its narrative focus:

In principle, the mutiny of these well-to-do professional people against the building they had collectively purchased was no different from the dozens of well-documented revolts by working-class tenants against municipal tower-blocks that had taken place at frequent intervals during the post-war years (p.69).

As Lawrence Phillips has also argued in his reading of the novel, by insisting on the similarities between the failure of this affluent high-rise community and that of 'the working-class ghettos of the high-rise council estate', Ballard leaves no doubt 'that it is the building and its philosophy that fails not the people'.³⁵¹ I want to return to the question of the building's 'philosophy' and its relationship to its occupants shortly, but for now it is worth noting that not even Newman is quite so willing to discount the significance of socio-economic factors in the 'failure' of high-rises as Ballard clearly is, at least in the context of this novel; Newman notes towards the beginning of *Defensible Space*, in a rare and subsequently undeveloped reference to class difference, that '[t]he high-rise prototype [...] worked well for upper-middle-income families with few children but cannot be simplistically transplanted [...] for the use of large, low-income families'.³⁵²

There is also something anachronistic in writing of a large private sector high-rise residential development in London's Docklands in 1975; while commonplace today, such developments were in their infancy at the time of writing. It is for this reason that Ballard's vision of 'well-to-do professional people' is more redolent of middle-class communities in America than it is of working-class ones on

³⁵¹ Phillips, *London Narratives*, p.53.

³⁵² Newman, *Defensible Space*, p.7.

this side of the Atlantic. As Laura Colombino notes: ‘Ballard is commingling the social connotations of high-rise living in America, where height denoted wealth, and the social catastrophe of council tower blocks in England’.³⁵³ It is through this ‘commingling’ – through distancing his narrative from the social realities of high-rise living in Britain – that Ballard keeps his focus on psychology and away from any detailed social commentary. In imagining the opening sequence of his documentary, Wilder pictures ‘a long, sixty-second zoom, slowly moving from the whole building in frame to a close-up of a single apartment, one cell in this nightmare termitary’ (p.52). Ballard too is interested in narrowing to a tight focus, and David Pringle has identified such a focus as characteristic of Ballard’s writing in general, not just of *High-Rise*: ‘Ballard does not write a fiction of social *interaction* [...]. Rather, he is concerned with the individual’s relationship with his own mind and impulses’ [original emphasis].³⁵⁴ And even when a Ballard novel contains a great deal of social interaction as part of its narrative, as is the case with *High-Rise*, it is there because it is an important and useful way in which to examine individual psychology.

Now that I have suggested some of the ways in which Ballard distances his novel from some key elements of the socio-economic and political context within which it was written, I want to insist that this reality is nevertheless present in the text. Having done so I will consider once again, but in greater detail, those ways in which Ballard moves past the socio-economic and the political to the psychological.

In 1968 the architect Ernő Goldfinger and his wife Ursula moved into a flat high up in Balfron Tower – a newly completed high-rise creation of Ernő’s and the prototype for Trellick Tower – situated in Poplar and occupied by residents from the council housing list. During their few months’ stay the couple ‘invited all of the tenants up to the flat, floor by floor, for convivial champagne parties’.³⁵⁵ As with everything else related to the history of high-rise housing in Britain, commentators have offered radically different perspectives on this episode. Sutcliffe, for example, reports that Goldfinger’s gesture earned him ‘much favourable comment in the media’, whereas the *Architects’ Journal* labelled it ‘pr ploymanship’ in an article

³⁵³ Laura Colombino, *Spatial Politics in Contemporary London Literature: Writing Architecture and the Body* (New York and London: Routledge, 2013), p.50.

³⁵⁴ David Pringle, *Earth is the Alien Planet: J.G. Ballard’s Four-Dimensional Nightmare* (San Bernardino, California: The Borgo Press, 1979), pp.39-40.

³⁵⁵ Hanley, *Estates*, p.112.

entitled 'Please Come Down, Ernö', published while the Goldfingers were still in residence at Balfron.³⁵⁶ What seems certain is that Goldfinger was the blueprint for Ballard's architect, Royal, who also takes a flat in his own high-rise, and promises to hold a party for all the residents once all the apartments have been filled (p.15) – a promise that is never kept. (Despite the similarities between Royal and Goldfinger the building itself, with its extensive facilities including swimming pools, a supermarket, school and rooftop playground with paddling pool, bears a much closer resemblance to Le Corbusier's original Unité d'Habitation in Marseille, opened in 1952.) Thus the novel is rooted in something of the reality of high-rise – which is to say social – housing, bearing a passing resemblance to the most famous media stunt associated with this architecture.

This sense of just a passing resemblance to reality is very much relevant to the novel's presentation of class and status, and its stratification within and by the high-rise. Ballard makes clear that there is very little diversity indeed amongst the residents in terms of class: 'The two thousand tenants formed a virtually homogenous collection of well-to-do professional people' (p.10). Largely indistinguishable through their class identities, the residents soon divide themselves into different status groups according to which floor in the high-rise they live on. Moreover, traditional class identities are explicitly mapped onto these divisions: 'the lower nine floors' house the "proletariat" of film technicians, air-hostesses and the like', the 'central two-thirds of the apartment building' contains 'its middle class, made up of self-centred but basically docile members of the professions', while 'the top five floors of the high-rise' is occupied by 'the discreet oligarchy of minor tycoons and entrepreneurs, television actresses and careerist academics' (p.53). This, then, is the most significant way in which relationships within the building are organised in and through space, and Wilder ties together the various strands of status, class and space when pondering his wife's 'frail plea' to move to a higher floor:

Helen, of course, was thinking in terms of social advancement, of moving in effect to a 'better neighbourhood', away from this lower-class suburb to those smarter residential districts somewhere between the 15th and 30th floors, where the corridors were clean

³⁵⁶ Sutcliffe, *London*, p.183; James Hunter, 'Please Come Down, Ernö', *Architects' Journal*, vol. 147 (March, 1968), 513-515 (p.513).

and the children would not have to play in the streets, where tolerance and sophistication civilised the air (p.47).

There is thus a strange set of contradictions at work in the novel: the building is stratified along class lines at the same time as being socially homogenous, and the middle-class residents collectively respond to the architecture in a manner commensurate with the narrative regarding working-class people and high-rise living, which is to say with criminality. The residents are at once typical and atypical, and this paradoxical combination is key to Ballard's exploration of his characters' psychologies.

In thinking about this paradox I want to come back to Phillips's assertion that 'it is the building and its philosophy that fails not the people'. When Phillips writes of the building's 'philosophy' he is presumably referring to the philosophy of high-rise building more broadly – the conviction that there are certain benefits to building high-rises, either because they are a solution to overcrowding in the cities or because they are desirable spaces in which to live, or both. The novel charts the development of another high-rise 'philosophy': the emergence of a collective will amongst the residents to engage in acts of violence or other socially unacceptable behaviours. This collective will is, I have suggested, presented in the novel as a natural reaction to the architecture, through various, almost throwaway, asides – usually from Wilder's point-of-view – that have a journalistic, quasi-sociological tone. But there is also a second, much stronger current running alongside this insistence upon the residents' typicality: the claim that they are collectively *atypical*. One of the things that the high-rise's inhabitants have in common is that they each imagine themselves as distinct from their fellow residents. This is just one of many shared responses to the architecture. Early on in the text Robert Laing – one of the novel's three central characters, along with Wilder and Royal – observes that 'people in high-rises tended not to care about tenants more than two floors below them' (p.8). (Once again, the experience of living in this high-rise is being taken as typical of the experience of high-rise living.) Shortly after this, Laing, listening to an increasingly raucous mid-morning party taking place in another apartment high above him, muses that '[t]he internal time of the high-rise, like an artificial psychological climate, operated to its own rhythms, generated by a combination of alcohol and insomnia' (p.12). Indeed,

insomnia has become 'a common complaint in the high-rise, almost an epidemic' (p.13). In these ways, high-rise living is pathologised.

But the high-rise psychology that I want to identify in Ballard's text is something other than behavioural patterns or various forms of psychological distress that are a response to the building; it is something more like a predisposition. The building's population has, unbeknownst to itself, arrived already primed for the destruction and depravity that is to follow. It is through Wilder's consciousness that this idea is first articulated: 'Living in high-rises required a special type of behaviour, one that was acquiescent, restrained, even perhaps slightly mad' (p.52). Wilder's successful bid to scale and thus conquer the high-rise indicates that he does not think that these collective traits apply to him, or that he is unwilling to allow them to. (Others agree: Laing observes that Wilder 'hardly belonged to the high-rise' [p.19].) But even this feat only serves to cement his identity as resident – nearing the building's summit, and just before his strangely anti-climactic showdown with Royal, 'he could almost believe that he was the first and last occupant of this apartment building' (p.164). Similarly, Royal pictures Laing 'staring out all day from his balcony under the fond impression that he was totally detached from the high-rise, when in fact he was probably its most true tenant' (p.73). As with Wilder, Laing's sense that he somehow stands apart from the life of the high-rise is an affirmation of his belonging; the building's residents are united by their shared feeling of detachment. In imagining himself as different, Laing reveals that he is perfectly psychologically suited to life in the high-rise:

Would he soon be the last person alive in the high-rise? He thought of himself in this enormous building, free to roam its floors and concrete galleries, to climb its silent elevator shafts, to sit by himself in turn on every one of its thousand balconies (p.153).

Royal too imagines himself as entirely different from the people who reside in his creation. His first appearance in the text shows him stationed high up above the other residents, staring down with 'an uneasy mixture of arrogance and defensiveness' as if 'checking that an experiment he had set up had now been concluded' (p.27). Later it is apparent that this lofty perch is figurative as well as literal: 'he looked down on them for their good taste. The building was a monument to good taste [...]. Visiting his neighbours' apartments, he would find himself

physically repelled by the contours of an award-winning coffee-pot' (p.81). Royal's hatred for the other residents is commingled with a hatred for the building that makes such a life possible. But this passage ends with a glimmer of morbid hope: 'Thank God that they were at last breaking out of this fur-lined prison' (p.81). The architect's frustration with the high-rise – his defensiveness, his revulsion – is tempered by pleasure, even pride, in the increasingly violent behaviour. And these apparently oppositional feelings are made more explicit elsewhere. Packing to leave the high-rise – a tokenistic response to the growing unrest that Royal and his wife never go through with – he condemns the building as a mechanical failure, chiming with one facet of the narrative of high-rise failure that was both epitomised by and grimly realised in the Ronan Point disaster: 'This huge building he had helped to design was moribund, its vital functions fading one by one – the water-pressure failing as the pumps faltered, the electrical sub-stations on each floor switching themselves off, the elevators stranded in their shafts' (p.68). But if there is guilt and regret, there is also hope, as Royal muses that 'the present breakdown of the high-rise might well mark its success rather than its failure' and congratulates himself for 'helping the two thousand residents towards their new Jerusalem' (p.70). The residents are united by their propensity, by their *need*, for violence, and Royal's building provides them with the perfect space within which to play out their desires.

All three of the novel's central characters ultimately find their place within the new order of the high-rise, and in all three cases their fates were prefigured in the text, so that their final situations constitute a fulfilment of their desires in relation to the building – of their own psychological relationship to the architectural space. Royal, having been mortally wounded by Wilder, joins the pile of corpses in the empty swimming pool, 'as if hoping to find a seat for himself on this terminal slope' (p.170). This is significant as a final gesture because the swimming pool had earlier been the site of an act intended to establish Royal's growing dominion over the building; in allowing his Alsatian to drink from the swimming pool and urinate in front of the bathers, Royal sought to 'define the small terrain coming under his sway' (p.87). For his part Wilder, after successfully scaling the high-rise and killing Royal, discovers that a number of female residents have established a makeshift kitchen on the roof, complete with a large spit and fire, their children playing in the bone-strewn sculpture-garden (pp.166-168). When the hungry women encircle him in preparation to kill and devour him, it is the final fulfilment of Wilder's desire to be mothered

once again, something he has been unable to find since the death of his ‘over-emotional mother who had loved him devotedly through the longest possible childhood she could arrange’ (p.47). His wife, who ‘had not been able to bring herself to treat Wilder like her son’, cannot meet this need (p.48). He is briefly ‘nursed’ by a young woman whom he overpowers in the course of his climb (p.160), but it is not until his encounter with his ‘new mothers’ that he truly finds a maternal surrogate (p.168). The deaths of Royal and Wilder, and the latter’s cannibalisation by a gang of women to sustain themselves and their hungry brood, are exemplary of how the high-rise permits residents to collectively fulfil their individual needs and desires.

The prefiguring of Laing’s final situation is somewhat different from those of Royal and Wilder, in that it is prefigured narratively. The novel ends with Laing sat on his balcony cooking an Alsatian – presumably Royal’s – over an open fire (p.173), and it begins shortly after this, with Laing eating the dog, and reflecting that ‘everything had returned to normal’ (p.7). In this way Laing, the high-rise’s ‘most true tenant’, operates as a kind of constant running through the text. Lacking the other men’s desire to dominate the building and each other, it is Laing that finds a way to survive in the building according to its new rules, leaving him, on the final page, to celebrate ‘his new-found freedom’ and reflect that ‘[o]n the whole, life in the high-rise had been kind to him’ (p.173). In the final fates of these three men the oppositions of success and failure, of normality and abnormality, even of life and death, collapse. Social breakdown, occasioned by architectural breakdown, has created a blood-soaked utopia, and the book closes with an image of its spread:

Laing looked out at the high-rise four hundred yards away. A temporary power failure had occurred, and on the 7th floor all the lights were out. Already torch-beams were moving about in the darkness, as the residents made their first confused attempts to discover where they were. Laing watched them contentedly, ready to welcome them to their new world (p.173).

All three of the texts I have discussed in the course of this chapter work to situate themselves in relation to one or more of the various narratives of reconstruction’s ‘failure’ that began to emerge in the mid-1950s and gained momentum over the

following decades. Wilson's novel is the most firmly rooted in the narrative that it appropriates. Whereas *Albert Angelo* and *High-Rise* both put some distance between their narratives and the real-life spaces upon which they draw – the former through formal experimentation and the insistence that it is all 'lies', the latter through a process of defamiliarisation – *Late Call*'s Carshall New Town is a solid, believable presence. Yet Wilson's text refuses to be drawn into making simplistic assumptions about the relationship between architectural space and psychological experience. It, in common with Johnson's and Ballard's, insists on complexity. In all three novels architectural space is at its most complex and indeterminate when it is peopled – when it comes into contact with the personal. *Late Call* suggests that architectural space speaks to the individual's history. In *Albert Angelo* too the focus is on an individual's relationship to architecture as London is revealed through Albert's movements around the city, mimicking Johnson's. Finally, in *High-Rise* there is the ultimate merging, as architectural and psychological space become one and the same.

Most strikingly, in the context of this thesis, the texts remain resolutely focussed on individual psychology in spite of their often detailed engagement with wider conversations pertaining to architectural space. They sidestep the debates. To this extent they mirror the manner in which post-war reconstruction had, to a point, during the 1960s, and certainly by the middle of the 1970s, ceased as a concerted project. No longer part of a projected future, no longer tied up with expectations, with hopes, with possibilities, with polemics and solutions, the architecture of post-war reconstruction had become simply a material fact of the present moment. These three very different novels together capture something of that moment in which the conversation shifted, and there was an end to the widespread assumption that architecture was and would be the agent of radical transformations.

Coda: Drizzle at Stratford

In reality the ruination of the British Empire Exhibition buildings was rather more protracted and piecemeal than Woolf's vision of rapid dissolution; the process was characterised by conversion and repurposing. The Empire Stadium stood until its demolition in 2002, and became better known as Wembley Stadium. Several of the other buildings were taken down and rebuilt elsewhere, with the West Africa building becoming a jam factory in Letchworth, the Palestine building a laundry in Glasgow, and the Burma pavilion ending up in Australia.³⁵⁷ The last of the buildings, The Palace of Industry, remained partially intact and in situ, as a warehouse, until it

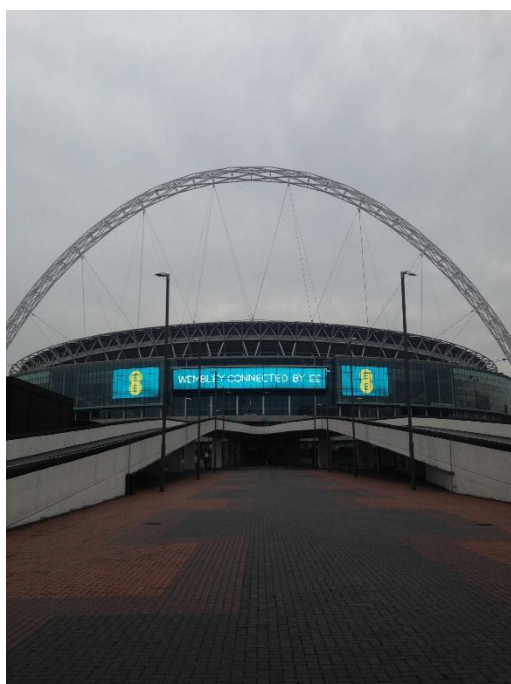


Figure 11, Wembley Stadium

was demolished in 2013, reportedly to make way for a carpark. The site as a whole was also a key venue for London's 1948 Olympic Games, and Olympic Way – which ran from Wembley Park Underground Station to the stadium – was built specially for the occasion, using German POWs as labourers.³⁵⁸

Olympic Way still connects tube station and stadium, although the new Home of Football (Figure 11) is a far more imposing presence than its predecessor. Walking towards the stadium one weekday in early November, I find its gigantic white

arch more overbearing and awkward than spectacular. The thoroughfare is flanked on either side by building sites, soon-to-be apartment blocks that the developers have pre-emptively labelled 'LONDON'S NEW STYLISH, MODERN LANDMARK', and the skyline is crammed with cranes. Cars whip past at high speed at either end of the Way, under walkways or up on elevated segments of road, and even the presence of other walkers does little to mitigate the sense that nothing here is built for the human scale.

³⁵⁷ Janie Hampton, *The Austerity Olympics: When the Games Came to London in 1948* (London: Aurum, 2008), p.30.

³⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, p.33.



Figure 13, Olympic Park, Stratford

spectacle, a feeling of dereliction that pervades in spite of the fact that much of the site still gleams with novelty (Figure 12). Meanwhile the Olympic ‘legacy’ – which currently takes the form of a large construction site with hoardings exclaiming, amongst other slogans, ‘AL FRESCO NOT AL DESKO’ – projects an equally



Figure 12, Olympic Park, Stratford

gleaming future. But in spite of the insistence that more is yet to come this feels like a place whose significance has passed. Like at Wembley, the vastness of the buildings make them difficult to comprehend up close, while the abundance of vacant, tarmacked space makes the city proper seem very far away. Images of this seemingly distant London abound, as if in an attempt to insist that this strange hinterland is indeed part of it. Nature is not so much shut out, like at Woolf’s Wembley, as regulated:

Earlier that day I had visited the site of a more recent Games. The Olympic Park at Stratford seems to gesture towards several different points in time simultaneously. It has the unpeopled air of a past

restricted only to planters and small beds, or present at one remove in yet more images (Figure 13). The dedication from Iain Sinclair’s *Ghost Milk* (2011) reads: ‘In

memory of the huts of the Manor Garden Allotments'.³⁵⁹ These allotments, which were demolished to make way for the Olympic site, are a metonym for the unassuming but vital spaces that were cleared to make way for the Park. The genuinely productive allotment has been replaced with anaemic grass and trees as hollow product.

Sinclair's account of the Olympic Park during its construction throws up another example of how practices associated with the pre-Olympic site have been rehabilitated and repurposed as part of the legacy. The following is from Sinclair's description of the site's perimeter during its construction.

The tacky blue of the perimeter fence does not appear on any of the computer-generated versions of the Olympic Park. The prospect from the north is favoured, down towards Canary Wharf, the Thames and the Millennium Dome. The heritage site looks like an airport with one peculiar and defining feature: no barbed wire, no barrier between Expo campus and a network of motorways and rivers. The current experience, in reality, is all fence; the fence is the sum of our knowledge of this privileged mud. Visit here as early as you like and there will be no unsightly tags, no slogans, a viscous slither of blue. Like disinfectant running down the slopes of a urinal trough. Circumambulation by the fence painters is endless, day after day, around the entire circuit; repairing damage, covering up protests. Sticky trails drip into grass verges, painterly signatures. Plywood surfaces never quite dry. Subtle differences of shade and texture darken into free-floating Franz Kline blocks.

But the major artworks, self-sponsored galleries of opposition, occur at the back of the fence, and on the unexposed panels of giant off-highway hoardings. Two artists in particular, white boys emerging from the squatting and warehouse-occupying nexus, have undertaken astonishing projects: mile after mile of two-headed crocodiles, grinning gum-pink skulls, clenched Philip Guston fists. A punk codex using industrial quantities of emulsion to revise railway bridges and condemned factories. We are here, they shout: Sweet Toof and Cyclops. Ghost-ride mouths eating the rubble of development, the melancholy soup of black propaganda.³⁶⁰

Now once again, more than three years after the Games, the Park is covered in fences enclosing building sites. And once again those fences are covered in artworks, this time in the form of East London Canvas, a 'new creative space' set up by the

³⁵⁹ Iain Sinclair, *Ghost Milk: Calling Time on the Grand Project* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 2011).

³⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, pp.72-73.

Foundation for FutureLondon [sic], which is the organisation responsible for ‘delivering’ the legacy.³⁶¹ A children’s art project, sponsored by the developers and covered in their branding, now sits alongside slogans such as ‘EXPAND YOUR BUSINESS HORIZONS’ on the building site hoardings, both echoing, in form but not in content, the protest slogans – ‘A POX ON THE OLYMPICS’³⁶² – that marked the perimeter fence a few years previously. The project itself echoes too – no doubt entirely unconsciously – something of Sinclair’s own approach to writing London. It is introduced on the hoardings with a quote from ‘data designer’ Stefanie Posavec: ‘Collecting moments, not things’. The ‘Canvas’ itself features data gathered by the children at a particular place in the park during a workshop, and includes readings of humidity, temperature, sounds heard, plants spotted and emotions felt, all of which are expressed as bold blocks of colour. This data gathering is reminiscent of Sinclair’s psychogeographic wanderings, his storing up of fragments. Thus practices or strategies – both painterly and writerly – that were initially conceived as a critical response to the site have now been incorporated into its reproduction.

For Sinclair this collecting of moments is the only way to respond to a project like the Olympic Park; in *Ghost Milk* he recounts how a group of concerned locals approached him to ask what they might do to resist Stratford’s enforced transformation, and he notes his reply: ‘Bear witness. Record and remember’.³⁶³ Such a process is equally central to the work of two other writers who are deeply engaged with London’s past and present: Patrick Wright and Peter Ackroyd. In his introduction to Emmanuel Litvinoff’s *Journey Through a Small Planet*, Wright writes, ‘Litvinoff has long had an eye for the glowing Whitechapel fragment that lights up a wider history.’³⁶⁴ Substituting Whitechapel for London more broadly, this metaphor could equally be applied to Wright’s own work, as well as to Sinclair and Ackroyd’s. There is a preservationist impulse at work in their writing, and a concurrent desire to use the fragment as a way to counter a larger, macroscopic, and most often myopic, ‘official’ history. This impulse, at least for Sinclair and Ackroyd, is one element of what Phillips has identified as a non-fictional turn in the writing of

³⁶¹ FutureLondon website, <<http://www.future.london/>> [accessed 9/11/15].

³⁶² Sinclair, *Ghost Milk*, p.65.

³⁶³ Sinclair, *Ghost Milk*, p.144.

³⁶⁴ Patrick Wright, ‘Brick Lane: Views from the Quayside’, introduction to Emanuel Litvinoff, *Journey Through A Small Planet* (London: Penguin, 2008), pp.xi-xlviii (p.xxvi).

London: '[T]he form of London's history has been colonised, appropriated, popularised, if not fetishised by creative writers rather than by historians'.³⁶⁵

Sinclair's literary accumulation of fragments of the city, as he makes clear in that episode from *Ghost Milk*, is an admission of powerlessness. Faced by a future with seemingly little promise, the writer appropriates history as a last, doomed act of resistance. This is not by any means to suggest that the collecting of fragments is always a futile endeavour; the accumulation of alternative, hidden histories and narratives can be a very powerful, and useful, practice. But it is explicitly framed by Sinclair, in relation to the Olympics, as an activity in which he is engaged precisely because he has no other way to resist – in fact he is entirely unable to resist, even through this activity – the forward march of the neoliberal logic which is at present the guiding principle behind the organisation of London's spaces.

In my introduction I suggested that it is always the business of architecture to intervene, however indirectly, in the city, whereas literary writing is by its very nature not an intervention. The distinction rings true when it comes to Sinclair and *Ghost Milk*. The text is, at least in part, an acknowledgement that intervention is impossible: an expression of a frustrated desire to intervene. Here and in his other works of non-fiction Sinclair makes explicit the links between the changing urban scene that he describes and the wider political and social shifts with which these changes are inextricably linked – in particular the impact of Thatcherism and its offspring, Blairism. Not many of the texts that I have looked at make such a link quite so explicit, but it has been this thesis's contention that all of the literary texts with which it has engaged are interested in the close relationship between built space and the conditions and relations which affect how that space is inhabited. It is precisely because of this relationship that my chosen texts make use of architectural space in the ways in which they do: as a way to, like Sinclair, express frustration or anxiety in the face of a change or transition; as a way to express a sense of regret at that which is deemed to have been lost; as a way to express a moment of visceral, violent transformation; as a way to bemoan a lack of change – a sense of having become stalled – or to register misgivings about the particular character and direction of change.

³⁶⁵ Phillips, *London Narratives*, p.132.

I also suggested at the close of my final chapter that the texts read therein mark a point, or number of points, at which a particular kind of attitude towards architecture and the city – an attitude encapsulated in post-war architectural modernism – lost its currency. This modernism, for all its flaws, perceived or otherwise, was interested in how people occupy and use the city, and how they might do so differently in the future. London's contemporary architectural scene, by contrast, seems to make few concessions to the idea that a city is for living in. Instead the image of 'London' is endlessly projected outwards, not just through obviously spectacular spaces like the Olympic Park, but increasingly through domestic space: apartment blocks that do not function as homes because their owners do not live in them, but that are valuable precisely because they resemble homes, because they are potential homes. Nowhere is neoliberalism's erasure of post-war social democracy, and the modernism that came with it, more evident than in Elephant and Castle's recent history; the Heygate's demolition was completed at the end of 2014 and its residents displaced long before that, and at the time of writing the estate's replacement, Elephant Park, is well underway.

Wilson, Johnson and Ballard wrote texts that were implicit expressions of the fact that architecture was no longer interested in social transformation, and that were at once engaged with and at a distance from the architecture of their particular moments. The contemporary non-fictional turn, and in particular the associated emphasis that a writer like Sinclair places on the fragment, suggests a similarly complex and conflicted stance: a way of writing urban space, of using architectural space in writing, that insists upon the primacy of the individual moving through the city, but that at the same time sees that individual's place within the city as profoundly threatened.

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